

THE BANDAR-LOG MURDER

WHEN Gilda Herring left the Billhook Club early one evening it was because her fiancé Julian had failed to turn up, and when she got home and discovered Julian's latest diversion, in the form of Theo Nineveh, dead on her divan she was panic-stricken. Julian was the only other person with a key to her flat and he was at best an idle young scrounger, but she was deeply in love with him and determined to shield him. So she called in her cousin, Ambrose Merriman, whose twin interests were philately and crime, and he together with his fiancée Delia, who hindered rather than helped him, solved this complicated affair.

Flitting in and out of this most unusual thriller are the other members of Julian's set known as the Bandar-log, because they were as pointless and reasonless as the Monkey people in Kipling's *Jungle-Book*.

CAROLINE COMSTOCK



***The
Bandar-Log
Murder***



**MUSEUM
STREET
THRILLER**

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Chapter One

I WAS in the Billhook Club with Gull and Emmie, and, of course, Ambrose. I constantly find myself in places I don't want to be just because Ambrose insists on taking me to them. Anyway I didn't like the Billhook much, and I didn't like the company. Emmie and Rannie Palfer seemed to be the sort of people one should like, and Ambrose seemed to like them; so there was nothing for it but to conclude that I had no judgment—a fact upon which Ambrose is apt to harp. Emmie was a tall, slim woman with an intelligent, kind face, a heavenly figure and a superb dress sense, while Rannie was thin and amusing, with brown thick hair, but with a coldness in him. No matter how gay he was being, one sensed that coldness. Perhaps it was something to do with being an economist. Economists are no doubt excellent people and probably essential, but somehow they are always engaged in taking the fun out of life and pointing out unpleasant facts.

I liked the man they called Gull. He was a journalist and tough . . . but human.

The Billhook was decorated with murals portraying a lot of angular men and women, outlined against a flat blue sky and treading about in fields of wheat. Some lucky ones were lying on the ground in attitudes of abandon and drinking wine. The music consisted of guitars and mandolines, and everything was plainly designed to be very atmospheric—but what atmosphere I was not quite sure.

Ambrose was paying all his attention to Emmie, and Rannie wasn't paying attention to anything at all, but sitting in a reverie—presumably working out how many more small businesses should be shut down because they didn't fit in with the Welfare of The State. Only Gull talked to me, but he seemed preoccupied too, and kept on looking towards the curving flight of stairs that led down from the entrance into the room.

I guessed he must be wondering where Gilda Herring was. It was really on account of Gilda that Ambrose and I had come to the place: Ambrose had her badly on his mind. She's his first cousin and an orphan with money of her own and she was in love with what Ambrose, who likes 'difficult' words, calls a detrimental. A young man called Julian. And I must admit that on 'this' occasion Ambrose was more than right. And lately I noticed that Ambrose was getting fidgety about 'Gilda . . . though he always pretends to be completely detached and says that if people are determined to make fools of themselves, who is he to try and stop them.

Gilda had talked to me quite a lot too. She would come along to the family mansion, and sit in my bedroom and go on for hours and hours trying to justify herself to herself. "People don't understand Julian!" was the burden of her song. And—"It's all very well for you, Delia, you've got Ambrose and a father and a home, and you're pretty. But I've only got Julian, and without me he'd go completely to the devil. You know that."

Personally I thought he'd gone, but I couldn't say so to her. It's only unkind to tell people what they really do know in their heart of hearts . . . and don't want to know.

She was supposed to have come here tonight. Emmie and Rannie believed in trying to 'take her out of herself.' Quite futile, of course, but I suppose if you're frightfully intellectual you don't understand about the way people *feel*; you only know what they ought to do and what you would do in their circumstances—oblivious of the fact that being what you are, you never would be in their circumstances. I think Gull understood about her, but then he's a human being, for one thing, and for another I have an idea he's in love with her.

Rannie came out of his abstraction and said: "Hullo, there, Nineveh. I wonder where Theo is."

Emmie managed to spare an instant from her conversation with Ambrose to say rather bitchily, "You don't expect her to be with her husband, do you?"

Ambrose looked over at me and winked solemnly, which had a pleasant, warming effect, because although I am not jealous, I do sometimes get slightly bored with the way women monopolise him—and the way he allows them to do so;

though I must admit, that he only does it when there is some ulterior motive, and usually a very good one. But I couldn't really see why he should want to get into a huddle with Emmie Palfer.

And just then Gilda came down the staircase. She's not really pretty, as she said herself, but she's attractive if only she could get rid of her inferiority complex long enough to realise it. She is very small and dark with wispy hair that falls into enviable little waves, and a wide, red mouth and enormous dark eyes. But she didn't look attractive then. She looked sallow and strained and walked jerkily. I saw her look at Nineveh and away again, and remembered that one of Julian's more stupid things was a crush on Theo Nineveh. I guessed that seeing Paul Nineveh there alone, poor idiot Gilda was afraid that Julian might be with Theo.

She came dawdling up to our table and didn't look at Ambrose. She gave Gull a fleeting smile, but she seemed to greet Rannie with more enthusiasm than anyone else.

"Darling," said Emmie in a kind, authoritative tone, "What *have* you been up to? You're over an hour late."

"It wasn't a dinner party," said Gilda rudely.

"You know," said Rannie affectionately, "you're a nice person, Gilda, and you've got intelligence hidden away somewhere or other, though it's burning very low just now."

"Oh, don't tease her," said Emmie kindly.

She gave her warm, vivid smile as she spoke, but Gilda paid no attention, only slumped down in a chair next to Gull.

"She'll get over it," said Ambrose curtly.

"A consummation devoutly to be desired," said Emmie.

She smiled at me as she spoke. She had a conspiratorial manner as if she and I understood something about Gilda, but somehow I didn't like her, and I looked dumb—like a fish.

Paul Nineveh drifted past our table. He was dancing with a blonde who looked as if she might have been in Belsen. She was pure skin and bone, and her make-up was quite macabre. He looked at Gilda and gave a smooth sort of grin.

"By the pricking of my thumbs, something evil this way comes." Until I had met Paul and Theo Nineveh through Gilda I had never realised how real that sensation could be. I'd never thought about evil as evil. It was a word one used

without thinking. There are bad types, and scroungers, and all those sort of people about, but they are not necessarily evil. Real evil isn't obvious. Naturally not, I thought suddenly. If it was, people would never be taken in by it. It is like Paul and Theo, good-looking perhaps, and even amusing. On the surface, of course. But—and Ambrose actually agrees with me over this—with Paul and Theo, you do get that pricking of the thumbs. There's nothing you can put your finger on. They're well-off, smart. Paul gambles, but what of that? Lots of people do and you don't simply loathe them! I don't exactly know what it is. I can't describe it. And not everyone feels it about them. . . .

As a matter of fact I think Gilda went the wrong way about it with Julian. She kept on proving to him in all kinds of ways, what was wrong with them. And he resented it furiously. It hurt his raw self-esteem. They were the only people who took much notice of him, and it was galling to him when everyone else took the worst possible view of them.

Ambrose tried to talk to Gilda, but it was no use. She wouldn't listen.

As Ambrose said, "Nineveh has no friends of his own standing. He has parasites. There's always something wrong with people who can only associate with people worse off financially than themselves."

Julian used to hang on to Nineveh, and then an aunt died and left him some money and he walked right out on Gilda. I think she did go a little crackers then. He made such an idiot of himself, being exhibitionist, and she had identified herself with him to such an extent that it was agony to her.

I knew that Ambrose was thinking about her. He was watching her with an expression I knew awfully well on his pale, thin face, a thoughtful troubled look, and I guessed he must be thinking about Julian and the fact that he was almost through his own money now . . . and how Theo Nineveh would drop him like a hot brick, and he'd go creeping back to Gilda . . . and she'd take him back. . . .

No one was talking much and the guitars thrummed on and on. I looked at the people in the club. Young men who were looking for mugs. Their faces were smooth and young, but vitiated. In repose they looked dead. Not even sad. Just

dead. Until, as Ambrose would say, 'A prospect appears!' Then they would wake up, smile and talk and laugh. Julian was like that, only Gilda would not see it.

Emmie said suddenly in her warm, deep voice, "You know, here we are. Quite intelligent citizens. Rannie and I perfectly good economists. . . . Gilda here, who really has brains. She writes pretty good copy . . . and Gull, a good journalist. . . ."

She looked at me and seemed to get a bit stuck.

"The perfect amanuensis," said Ambrose solemnly.

"Yes," said Emmie with enthusiasm. "And you, Ambrose, who are not only an expert philatelist and connoisseur . . . but even a detective . . . so they say."

"Just a Nosy Parker," Ambrose corrected her.

"Well, here we are," said Emmie energetically. "And we sit round in this joint, among all this ullage. Nasty ones too, some of them. What's wrong with us?"

Rannie said with his gentle grin. "Well, don't let's kid ourselves, we're sitting round because this silly but sweet Gilda has got Julian so much on her mind."

"No," said Gull suddenly, diving in, I was sure, to shield Gilda, "it's not that entirely. It's a lot of things. Sign of the times in one way. All of us restless and uncertain—not quite knowing where we're going. At least that goes for a lot of people. I don't know about you Palfers. You deal with formulas, facts and figures. But I get relaxed watching people. . . ."

"Yes," said Ambrose thoughtfully, "watching people has a lot to be said for it."

"I'm fed up," said Gilda violently. "I'm going home."

Gull looked at her, shrugged slightly and stood up. He glanced round the room and his nostrils flared suddenly.

"There's Brink," he said abruptly. "I thought he was still in gaol."

Ambrose frowned suddenly and I saw Brink was leaning up against the bar. I remembered that Ambrose had been quite het up about the Brink case. Brink had killed a man when he was driving at seventy miles an hour in London. He'd been convicted of manslaughter and sent to prison for about five years. He looked white and thin, and very dangerous. I even thought that he looked a little mad.

Gull was staring at him too, and his eyes were screwed into a frown. "You know," he said suddenly, "I've always thought there was something phoney about that ride to death of Brink's. I knew him pretty well and, though he was unstable, driving to the public peril was not one of his Bibles. Also he wasn't tight." He shook his head as if to clear it and added, "Oh well, twelve good men and true decided he did do it. Come on, Gilda. I ought to say a kind word to him, but somehow I don't feel up to it. He hasn't noticed us. let's slide."

"It's quite late," said Emmie. "Let's all go."

Now Emmie has very nice clothes. Until I met her I'd cherished the idea that women economists went about dressed in shapeless garments. I wished I had a grey corduroy suit like hers. . . . But it was an irritating thing about her. She never would let people do things on their own. Like now. Why not let Gull take Gilda off. He obviously wanted to.

"We'll take a taxi," said Rannie. "Gull and I will be big and take a taxi."

It was a heavenly night, cool and still. Above the roofs a thin moon hung in a silver sky. We walked down the street to look for a taxi and a cat scurried up from the basement and brushed against my legs. I don't like cats and I said, "Go away—shoo."

"For heaven's sake," said Gilda angrily, "that's a black cat. Must you shoo our luck away like that?"

"It's Delia's luck she's shooing away," said Ambrose placidly, "and so it's Delia's business."

Gull challenged a passing taxi and it drew into the kerb.

"Good, jolly good," said Rannie. "Drop us first. We're on your way. . . ."

"I've got my car," said Ambrose unexpectedly. "I'll take Delia home."

"Plutocrat," said Rannie.

Emmie yawned. She yawned widely and happily, like a child does.

Rannie reproved her.

"Dragged up," he said. "No manners at all."

"Not even that," said Emmie cheerfully. "My papa was engaged in discovering the secret of the universe, so I was mercifully left alone. Like Topsy - I just grewed."

She got into the taxi, and we all called good nights and then Ambrose and I were left alone.

"You haven't got the car," I told him.

He smiled at me beguilingly. Ambrose is thin and really rather plain, but he can beguile better than almost anyone.

"I know," he said, "but . . . I'd had enough of them. Besides, my thumbs are pricking. . . ."

It gave me a small shudder down my spine.

"Oh no," I said quickly. "No, Ambrose, don't say it. I've had it all the evening. I do hate some of the parties you choose."

But he didn't react as he usually does and say something idiotic. He stood staring thoughtfully up at the sky.

"You're a nice child, Delia," he said at last, "and your hunches are usually right about people. You don't like Emmie Palfer, do you?"

I told him I didn't.

"Funny," he said, "because she's such an obviously correct person to be liked. Oh, well . . . there's a cab. I'll take you home."

But when we got home, my revered Parent was still up and insisted on Ambrose coming in and going through an album of stamps that he had picked up in a junk shop. He was convinced that there was some extremely valuable stamp to be found in it.

Ambrose always falls for that particular bait, and they sent me off to make coffee while they went into a huddle over the tattered album.

They were still at it an hour later, and I was yawning my head off when the telephone rang and I answered it to hear Gilda's voice. She sounded awfully odd. Breathless and somehow secretive.

"Is Ambrose there?" she whispered. "I've been trying to get him for ages."

"Yes, he's here, Gilda," I said. "I'll get him."

It was extraordinary, but it didn't feel to me annoying being rung up like that, but simply that I'd almost expected it all the evening ". . . Something evil this way comes."

"Oh, Delia," said Gilda, and now her voice rose in a sighing wail, "Oh, Delia. Please come . . . bring Ambrose. Something awful has happened. Theo Nineveh's dead in my flat."

I couldn't speak for a moment. I could only swallow. Ambrose came to the telephone and I held it out to him dumbly.

He listened to Gilda saying that incredible thing again, and quite suddenly he looked desperately tired.

"All right," he said. "We'll be along. Hold everything."

"Now what's all this?" began my Parent indignantly, "I'm not going to have my daughter dragged into any more of your miserable murders. . . ."

"It's Gilda," said Ambrose curtly. "Delia must come along."

"I'll come too," said The Parent in a threatening tone.

Ambrose gave in.

"All right," he said. "You come too. But I have an idea Gilda would rather you didn't."

The Parent hesitated. He's really awfully understanding, though fiery.

"Very well," he grunted. "Better bring the little halfwit back with you."

Chapter Two.

GILDA lived in one of those enormous blocks of flats which consist of hundreds of little boxes with all modern conveniences. She had quite a nice little house of her own, but when the break with Julian came she couldn't bear to live in it any longer, and let it and went to live in the flat belonging to some friend of hers who had gone away for six months. Ambrose thought it showed weakness, but I could understand just how she felt.

There was no one in the entrance hall—no sign of a porter. The place smelt warm and stuffy, and of some disinfectant stuff with which they did the floors. An enormous oil painting in an ornate gilt frame hung on the wall above the big fireplace; it was supposed to portray Mr. Firkin, who built the flats. He was just the type of man who *would*.

Ambrose was very silent as we went up in the lift and as we walked down the long narrow corridor to Gilda's number. He rang the bell and Gilda opened the door immediately, as if she had been standing there waiting for us.

She looked dreadful—the colour of old ivory and her face rigid. There was an expensive, subtle perfume lingering about and the wireless was going, which seemed odd.

Ambrose looked past her into the sitting-room and then said curtly:

"Take her into the bedroom, Delia, I'll see to this."

"It wasn't Julian," said Gilda in a thin, scratchy voice.

"Into the bedroom," said Ambrose firmly. "I'll come and talk to you, my dear, when I've got things going properly."

He added, "If there's any brandy, Delia, give her some, but not too much."

"Are you going to—to send for the police?" asked Gilda.

"What else?" said Ambrose curtly.

That curtness seemed to have a good effect, because she

said, "The brandy's in the store cupboard in the kitchenette," and walked quite calmly into the bedroom.

I got the brandy and took it into the bedroom. Ambrose had closed the sitting-room door, and I found Gilda sitting on the edge of her bed with a look of utter exhaustion.

"Go on," I said in an imitation of Ambrose's curtness. "Tell what happened."

And as if a tap had been turned on Gilda began to talk. She talked on and on in a desperate sort of way, as if she must tell everything—but everything. It was frightful! It was too much altogether, poor darling . . . it was like listening to a nightmare and then, in some horrible way, being in the nightmare oneself.

She had said good-bye to Gull down in the hall and gone straight up in the lift. She hadn't seen the porter and everything seemed very quiet. When she got into the flat the wireless was going, and she felt a little quirk of anxiety. . . . She was quite sure she had switched it off before she went out. Two letters were lying on the little stone-topped bureau and she stared at them . . . feeling vaguely puzzled and uneasy, as if it was totally unnatural to find letters waiting. And then it came to her that it *was* unnatural—quite unnatural. They ought to have been on the floor. She'd been out since three o'clock and these must have come by the four o'clock post. She felt a queer sick feeling of excitement and apprehension. Letters did not waft themselves upwards from the floor and deposit themselves neatly on bureaux. Somebody had been in the flat. And it could only have been Julian. He had a key. No one else had.

It was quite silent (Gilda went on), and that foul perfume was hanging in the air. It wasn't possible she couldn't believe it possible that Julian had become so lost to all sense of decency that he would have brought Theo into her flat.

"Well," she told herself, "what are you waiting for? If it's Julian, he's there in the sitting-room. So go on in."

But she had a deep repugnance to going into that room. She told herself it was absurd. Then she got a horrible feeling that Julian and Theo were in there—guiltily silent. But that was nonsense . . . Julian would always make a gesture . . . would call out . . . would try and carry it off.

She went on talking as if she was thinking aloud.

Then, I gathered, the paralysed feeling dissolved and before she could start to think again, she took two steps across the hall and opened the door.

The perfume was much stronger, she said, and the wireless was going softly. Some dance music. Some nostalgic, exotic dance tune. The only light was the table lamp with its thick parchment shade that stood by the divan. And on the divan in an ugly, distorted heap, lay Theo Nineveh. Gilda knew she was dead. Without going anywhere near she knew it. . . . Death was there in the stiff, unnatural angle of the arm thrust up above the head; in the awkward position of a leg that sprawled over the edge of the divan. Soft pale hair hung in tousled strands over the face.

The wireless went bumbling on and she found it maddening while she was trying to disentangle herself from the nightmare, but it never occurred to her to turn it off. Then—by some horrible, chancy trick of light—she saw one open eye between the strands of hair and it seemed to be watching her. She screamed and bolted into the bathroom and was very sick.

I listened in a queer, bewildered way. It didn't make sense . . . and yet Gilda seemed to find it did make sense. It was the sort of thing she seemed to expect to happen to anyone like Theo Nineveh.

Well, it seems she sat on the edge of the bed with her teeth chattering and wisps of thought drifting round her mind. (She told it like that.) They were quite disconnected and she said them out loud, talking to herself in the mirror.

Then her teeth began to chatter again and for a moment nothing mattered except where Julian was, and what he was doing. A great longing to find him swept through her, a longing that was like a sharp ache. Until suddenly she knew she had to do something . . . she must do something. She ought to ring 999. . . . But she couldn't. She was too frightened. . . . And then she thought of Ambrose. . . .

I sat and held her hand and remembered the cases I had read, real cases, and how scornful I had been about people who found corpses and didn't at once send for the police and tell the truth. And now I knew how they felt. Gilda couldn't send for the police. She had to know some things first. About

Julian. About what to say. Had Mandeville, the porter, seen him come up? She couldn't send for the police. To her it would be like hanging Julian.

"And then at last," she told me, "I thought of Ambrose."

At that moment Ambrose came into the bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"The police are on their way, Gilda," he said. "For heaven's sake, how did this happen?"

Gilda's face crumpled up, but she got it under control again.

"I don't know," she said heavily. "I found her when I came back."

"But lord almighty," said Ambrose, "you've been back for over an hour!"

"I know," she said, "I know. I didn't know what to do. I don't now."

"There's only one thing to do," said Ambrose, "and that's tell me exactly what happened—and don't keep anything back, honey child."

When he gets flippant like that I always know he's badly worried.

Gilda looked sulky and guarded, a stubborn line pinched up her mouth, so that Ambrose regarded her suspiciously.

"And when the police get here," he said, "you're going to tell them the truth—the whole truth—and nothing but the truth."

Gilda nodded.

Ambrose said without warning: "I suppose Julian had a key?"

Gilda went very white and opened her mouth, but Ambrose interrupted whatever she was going to say.

"Of course he has, Gil," he said kindly. "Don't bother to answer."

Just then there came an imperative buzzing from the front door and Ambrose got up and ambled leisurely away to open it. He came back with what seemed an awful lot of people, and it was very different from the affair down at Grogan's. . . . There is undoubtedly a difference between being very rich and living in a mansion when there's been a murder and living in a two-roomed box in a block of inexpensive flats.

They crowded in and were abrupt and efficient. They'd brought the police surgeon and he went straight into the room where Theo was.

Gilda seemed to have become suddenly icy cold and calm. She came out of the bedroom and went quite stonily towards the sitting-room.

"Hold on," said Ambrose, "you don't need to go in there, Gil. This is Inspector Mellor. . . . Mellor, this is Miss Herring. Perhaps we'd better conduct this interview in the hall here. . . . There's a chair for her over there."

"Yes, that would be best," said the inspector.

He had a deep, quiet voice, a velvety sort of voice, and a square face. His hair was rather thin, but still curly, and he sounded non-committal, but sympathetic. It seemed to me that he knew Ambrose, and was faintly irritated to find him there.

"Perhaps you'll tell me exactly what happened, Miss Herring," he said in an interested way, as if he was about to hear some casual piece of news.

Gilda told him quite briefly, and explained at the end how confused and shocked she had been and why she hadn't at once telephoned the police.

He nodded with understanding and disapproval combined, and Ambrose's mouth twitched slightly, as if he'd seen Mellor at work before.

"Miss Herring," said Mellor, "has anyone else a key to this flat?"

"No," said Gilda stonily. "No—no one else."

Ambrose looked quite expressionless. He didn't say anything, though.

Mellor went on almost dreamily asking questions. Did Gil know Theo? Was she a friend? Had she the entrée, as it were? Gilda said she did know her, and she wasn't in any way a friend.

"I didn't like her," she said abruptly.

"Extraordinary that she should have come here," suggested Mellor. "I wonder how she—they—got in."

"Extraordinary," said Gilda. "Perhaps Mandeville—the porter—saw them."

"We'll ask him," said Mellor, as if it was an excellent suggestion, which could never have occurred to him unaided.

"She was not a friend of yours at all?" he asked again innocently.

"She was a woman I loathed," said Gilda defiantly. "She was a friend of my—my ex-fiancé."

"I see," said Mellor and stared at her sleepily.

He was a sleepy-looking man, and that velvety voice was positively drowsy. I was quite sure he was horribly clever.

"She has a husband," I said without thinking and saw Ambrose look at me with angry pity.

Mellor turned his sleepy gaze on to me.

"Yes," he said, "I know. To be frank, we know quite a lot about Mrs. Nineveh. Yes."

Ambrose said casually, "If you know anything about her, Mellor, you probably know that some of her friends have no difficulty about getting into other people's premises."

"I know that too," said Mellor. "How do you?"

"I get about," said Ambrose complacently.

"Fennell," said Mellor to another man in plain clothes, "just hop down and see the porter, will you? See if he saw anyone coming in tonight. You can give him a description of Mrs. Nineveh. You know her."

The police surgeon came out of the sitting-room. He was a small, abrupt man with squinty eyes. He looked inquisitive and I hated him. Ambrose frequently says I am given to quite irrational likes and dislikes, and that my woman's intuition is usually at fault.

"Well?" asked the inspector.

"Strangled," grunted the doctor, "manual strangulation."

"Time of death?" asked the inspector.

"So far as I can say any time within the last six hours. The room temperature makes exact diagnosis difficult," said the doctor.

Two men with a camera came out of the sitting-room.

"All done?" asked Mellor.

"All done, sir," said the men simultaneously like Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee.

"All right," said Mellor. "What about prints?"

"Stevens and Anderson are getting on with that, sir. Nearly finished," they intoned.

"All right, you can send up the stretcher," said Mellor.

I swallowed and he looked at me sleepily. He gave me the same feeling that the cat had done. He was like a big sleepy tom cat, I thought, and shivered.

"The flat will be clear in a short time now," he said sympathetically to Gilda.

Gilda nodded.

"You might as well have *my* fingerprints," she said in a silly aggressive tone. "They must be all over everything, and then you will at least know which are mine."

Mellor cocked an eye at her.

"That's a good idea," he said pleasantly. "You look tired, Miss Herring. I won't bother you much more tonight. Would you like to have some tea or something?"

"I'll make it," I said with fervent relief at being able to get away for a few minutes.

There were sounds outside the door.

"Perhaps you'd like to go into the bedroom," said Mellor. "This won't take long and it will be much easier once the—once Mrs. Nineveh is taken away."

"Much easier," said Gilda and choked. "I can't think why she—they should have come here. I can't think."

Weak tears rose in her eyes and she looked utterly desolate and I knew she was thinking that only Julian would have thought of coming here, and knew that Ambrose thought that too—and in all probability this odiously competent policeman knew it too.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go into the bedroom."

"That's right," said Mellor with a revolting patronising kindness.

We went into the bedroom and sat side by side on the bed. There were shuffling feet and bumps, and movements, and then more shuffling until at last I heard the sound of the flat door closing, and the footsteps went heavily along the corridor outside.

Ambrose put his head round the door.

"Come along out now," he said. "I've put the kettle on. And buck up, young Gilda."

We came out. The inspector was talking to Pennell and they were both looking at something. I saw it was a button and a scrap of cloth, but I couldn't see clearly. I felt Gilda stiffen

(I was holding her arm) and guessed that she was afraid—very much afraid of that button and scrap of cloth.

The two men turned and Mellor said—"The porte saw no one, but I understand he's not always in the hall."

"He's very seldom there," said Gilda, "and never when he's wanted."

It seemed rather gruesome to go and drink tea in that sitting-room, but it was the only room and I wasn't going to be hypocritical and pretend that I minded Theo Nineveh being dead. She meant nothing to me. Gilda walked in as if *she* didn't mind either.

Ambrose brought in the tea. The inspector was looking through his notes. There was a uniformed constable in the hall. Everything looked quiet and tidy. The wireless had been turned off. Well, in any case there'd be no programme on now. It was impossible to credit that anything so beastly had happened, except that the perfume still hung in the air. . . .

Gilda made a stifled exclamation.

"What is it?" said Ambrose.

"Margery's clock," said Gilda. "The little gold clock she had from her father. It's gone!"

She looked suddenly frightened as if the theft was worse than the murder.

It seemed to me to be bordering on lunacy--that anyone should come here with Theo Nineveh, strangle her and then walk off with a gold clock.

The fingerprint men were still in the flat, going through the hall, bathroom and bedroom; and Pennell was with us in the sitting-room, standing in the background. Mellor looked at Ambrose thoughtfully and Pennell tapped his teeth with his pencil.

"Not so odd," said Ambrose blandly. "That crowd have monkey brains and jackdaw fingers."

"You're very sure it's 'that crowd,'" said Mellor pensively.

"I'd bet on it," said Ambrose.

"Miss Herring," said Mellor, "I wonder if there is anything else missing?"

Nothing else seemed to have vanished. The flat was littered with small objects of slight value. Snuff boxes and little

patch boxes,—that sort of thing. Gilda said she didn't notice anything else missing.

"There was some money of mine in the desk there," she added listlessly. "In the top drawer."

The money was gone.

"Curious," said Ambrose, as if he was talking to himself.

"Not so very," said Mellor sleepily, "murder and theft frequently go together. Funny mind—the amateur criminal has. Was there any inscription in the clock, Miss Herring?"

Gilda described an inscription and Mellor scribbled in his little book. I began to feel too tired to think any more. My eyes wanted to close and I had to stretch them open. Mellor's voice came from far away.

"Why did you bring this young lady along, Mr. Merriman? Not a very pleasant experience for her."

"She is indispensable to me," said Ambrose cheerfully. "She is also engaged to me. She is also a friend of Miss Herring's. Any more questions?"

"No," said Mellor.

It seemed to me that he chuckled suddenly.

"Well, we won't worry Miss Herring any more tonight," he added.

I did open my eyes then.

"She can't stay here," I protested.

"Don't worry," said Ambrose in his most annoyingly dictatorial voice. "She is going to stay with Miss Brown."

"Excellent," said Mellor. "I'll leave a man on duty here tonight."

"Well, collect what you need, Gilda, and we'll get going," said Ambrose.

"I'd—I'd rather stay here," said Gilda between her teeth.

"Well, you're not going to," said Ambrose.

"Better not," said Mellor sleepily.

I knew she wanted to stay on in the hopes that she could contact Julian. Little idiot, I thought tiredly, doesn't she know that that would be the surest way of linking him up with all this?

Chapter Three

THE Parent was marvellous when we got back. He was still sitting up, but he had changed into pyjamas and a dull red silk dressing-gown. His hair was slightly rumpled because he had stopped poring over his stamp album and was tackling a chess problem—an occupation that with him was conducive to bad language and tearing of hair. He was also smoking an enormous cigar, sure sign of sympathy and anxiety.

He behaved to Gilda as if the finding of the corpse of a woman she hated in her flat was really very tiresome, but not serious. He advised a nice strong brandy, but Ambrose interfered as usual.

"Cocoa and bed," he said.

Ambrose is the only person I know who can interrupt The Parent and get away with it. And also the only person who can boss me about and get away with it. I don't know why, because he's not what one would call a forceful character, not obviously anyway. People frequently make the mistake of thinking they can push him around and the result leaves them disgruntled and bewildered.

"Go on, moppet," he added to me. "Make her cocoa and send her to bed. I want to talk to your papa."

Gilda went quite meekly. I think she was absolutely exhausted, and beyond thinking. I pushed her into the spare room which is always ready for visitors, because The Parent has a lot of old seafaring pals who turn up from the Arctic regions or the tropics carrying strange trophies for his approval. Sometimes they stay for weeks. Gilda undressed in a trance and tumbled into bed and I didn't bother to make the cocoa because she fell asleep straight away. But I foresaw an awful lot of trouble with her when she woke up. . . . She'd want to go chasing round after Julian, and I was quite certain that Ambrose wouldn't let her.

Just as I was going to bed myself (which I was doing because

although I wasn't sleepy any longer, I wasn't going to let Ambrose think I was interested in his conversation with The Parent), the front door bell rang. It gave me an awful shock. For one wild moment I had the awful thought that Inspector Mellor had decided that Gilda had committed murder and had come round to arrest her, so I hurried into my black woollen housecoat and went down to find out what it was.

Ambrose looked at me with a sickeningly superior smile. It wasn't Mellor who had arrived, but Gull.

"Curiosity killed the cat," said Ambrose.

I made my most hideous face at him, but privately, because Gull was looking so shaken and worried that I felt Ambrose was carrying facetiousness too far.

"Why the devil did they choose Gil's flat for the scene of the crime?" said Gull, ignoring me completely. "Unless they wanted to pin it on her. . . ."

"If you want to know," said Ambrose lazily, "I don't think there was meant to be a crime. Not that sort of crime. You know that crowd. Bunch of small-time crooks and scroungers. Quite without any reason for anything they do. They act on the spur of the moment. They're rather subhuman. Any one of them is capable of saying, 'We're broke, darling, but a friend of mine has a flat and she usually keeps some money in it, let's go and see what can be done.'"

The Parent's face became choleric.

"There aren't people like that," he protested.

"Oh but there are," said Gull glumly.

"Kipling's Bandar-log," said Ambrose in a musing voice.

He frowned slightly as if he was working something out.

"You've hit it," said Gull harshly. "I've watched them sometimes in pubs and clubs. They gather together and chatter in whispers--just like monkeys, and then something alarms them, or distracts their attention, and they scatter and go whooping off. Then they rush together again, and one of them has succeeded in getting hold of something, and they all look at it, and gloat and giggle. It's probably a ten bob note one of them has cadged--or stolen. They live in grubby surroundings, and the height of their ambition is to find a sucker who'll take them out and buy them drinks . . . They call it being Bohemian!"

Something came to me suddenly. That odd nagging little worry that had been with me in Gilda's sitting-room.

"Ambrose," I said, "I never saw Theo's bag. . . . Did the police take it or something?"

Then I felt suddenly idiotic. It wasn't so clever really. If whoever it was had taken the clock and the money, why shouldn't he take the bag as well?

But Ambrose nodded thoughtfully.

"Mellor commented on that," he said. "And it's peculiar in a way, because I would have expected him to take the cash out of it . . . but to leave the bag. I don't know why, except that the bag itself was a personal thing to Theo, while the clock wasn't. And I have an idea that having murdered her, he might be a bit queasy about having her bag."

"That's what I was trying to explain," said Gull. "Everything will be peculiar and apparently pointless, because everything they do is pointless really. You'll find that all through, I think. Nothing will lead anywhere, because everything happened on the spur of the moment. Gil's flat, for instance. Mellor will go round looking for a reason—a motive—and he won't find it."

"I'm not so sure," murmured Ambrose.

Gull ignored him.

"Gil's flat, for instance," he went on, "Mellor's bound to think they went to her flat for a *reason*, and I'm prepared to bet they didn't. My Bandar-log theory again. Their heads came together and with a whoop and a screech they started off for Gil's flat, and if—as might well have happened, something occurred to distract their attention on the way, if someone had met them and said, 'Come to a party,' with another whoop and screech they'd have bounded off in that direction."

"They don't bound, they scuttle," said Ambrose. "Insect life in a way. . . ."

"It sounds nightmareish," I said.

"It *is* nightmarish," said Gull grimly. "It'll get more nightmarish."

Ambrose looked at him thoughtfully, but said nothing.

"Well, it's nothing to do with Gilda," said The Parent aggressively.

"Except," said Ambrose gently, "that Gilda has got the wind-up that it might have been Julian."

There was a flat little silence; then The Parent snorted.

"Julian Cleghorn?" he demanded. "You're not trying to tell me that young Cleghorn has got himself mixed up with people like—like these Bandar-log? Of course I know he's a bit of a young fool . . . but . . ."

His voice trailed away and he puffed furiously at his cigar. I knew exactly how he felt. He'd known Julian's people, and they had been a naval family. Julian had been in the R.N.V.R. during the war, and The Parent simply refuses to believe that anyone who has served with the Navy could really become a scrounging bad type. It's a religion with him.

"'Fraid so," said Ambrose apologetically.

"Good God!" said The Parent in a stunned voice.

There was another silence.

"I don't see why they should think he had anything to do with it," said The Parent at last.

"He'd a key to Gilda's flat," said Ambrose in a carefully dispassionate voice. "Gilda's an idiot, of course. She let him have it for some silly reason or other. She's got some hazy, protective feeling about him . . . and wanted him to feel that he always had a haven to come to. And—of course—he's been around with Theo Nineveh a lot since he came into that legacy."

"But you don't believe he did it, do you, Ambrose?" urged The Parent stubbornly.

"I don't think anything at the moment," said Ambrose unhelpfully, "and it's too late to do anything about it tonight. I need some sleep. Come on, Gull, we'd better leave the unfortunate Browns to get some sleep."

Without warning I burst into tears. I can't think why. I'm not at all given to tears and I suppose I was just too tired or something.

Ambrose stared at me in a shocked way, and then suddenly put his arm round my shoulder, and said, "My poor little sweet, don't cry. What on earth are you crying about?"

The Parent got well into his stride and boomed furiously, "What on earth do you think the child is? A moron? A robot?"

You drag her round and involve her in murder and sudden death? I've had enough of it . . . quite enough. . . ."

"It's all right," I sobbed. "It's all right really. Only I don't want it to be Julian. . . . I knew him when he was a little boy. . . ."

Gull said nothing. He looked oddly uncomfortable and grim, and as I mopped my eyes I knew just what he was feeling. *He* wanted it to be Julian. He wanted it to be Julian so that once and for all Gilda would be free of Julian and all the dangerous things that Julian meant. I could understand him feeling like that, but I was determined to help Gilda prove it wasn't so. That's what she would be doing the moment she woke up, and whether Ambrose approved or not, I was going to help her.

When Gilda woke up next morning, she was simply wonderfully calm. She was terribly polite to The Parent and apologised with a queer formality for having been such a nuisance and all that. She didn't mention Theo—or Julian. But she had a battened-down look, and I knew that inside her was a terror that might overwhelm her any moment. She wanted to see Julian. More than anything in the world did she want to see Julian. She was quite sure that the instant she saw him she would know for certain whether he had had anything to do with Theo Nineveh's death or not. I knew she felt that, because it was exactly what I should have felt if I had been in her place and Ambrose had been in Julian's.

She came down and sat in our small morning-room, which is really rather nice, though I say it myself. It looks out on to a small paved garden with a sycamore tree growing in it. Our Siamese cat, called Gluckstein, I don't know why—Ambrose christened him that—sat by the sycamore and observed the world through empty blue eyes, studiously ignoring the challenge of a battle-scarred black tom that crouched on the wall. There are stone-coloured walls and a stone-coloured carpet, and over the mantelpiece is Tony Crane's painting of an Italian market, all blues and reds and greens and a blaze of sunlight. It really is a nice room and sort of relaxing.

"Delia," said Gilda suddenly, "I can't stay here. I've got

to see Julian through this rotten thing, and it might drag you and your father into all kinds of beastly things."

"He'll see himself through," I said in what I meant to be a brisk common-sense tone.

She shook her head sadly, and with a look of tired wisdom.

"It's no good," she said. "There'll be mud scattered all round . . . and it'll spatter you, you'll be dragged into the inquest, you'll be asked questions. It'll seem as if you and Ambrose had been mixed up with—with the Nineveh crowd."

"I know," I said, "but wait till we hear what Ambrose says. You'd—you'd do much better to leave the whole thing to Ambrose and—and the police. Truly."

I had to say all that, because it was sense and it was what Ambrose would expect me to say, but I knew it was no good. Gilda wouldn't listen, any more than I would in her place.

"You'll be haunted by detectives," said Gilda gloomily. "But I can't go back to that flat."

"Well, stay for a few days," I urged her.

She shook her head restlessly. "I can't," she insisted. "I'd go crazy. I don't want to be rude."

"Look here," I said, "I'm on your side. I'll help you. It'll be much better if we try together."

I hadn't meant to say it. It just came out, and I knew that Ambrose and The Parent would be livid if they knew, but I had to do it.

Gilda was silent for a moment or two. She was concentrating so much that she almost squinted. I suppose she simply couldn't make up her mind whether to trust me or not, and I didn't blame her. It was perfectly obvious that no one with any sense would encourage her, and that Ambrose and The Parent would certainly not allow me to get mixed up in it. And that I might easily give way to Ambrose, and incidentally give her away too. But in this case I didn't believe that Ambrose was right. He always says that one must not allow emotion to obstruct judgment. But that can be carried too far, and it's a very masculine idea anyway.

"Can I telephone?" asked Gilda suddenly.

"Of course," I told her.

She hesitated.

"Listen," she said breathlessly, "I know you'll understand.

. . . I can't tell Gull or Ambrose, because they wouldn't at all."

"Well, I'll try," I said.

I felt a bit bothered because, of course, I was letting Ambrose down in a way; on the other hand, I had to help Gilda and keep her confidence. One thing I was sure of, and that was she'd get into some really horrible mess if she went off on her own.

"Well," said Gilda miserably, "Julian's living in a perfectly foul set-up. It's an old house in Kensington and it's run by an awful old man who calls himself The Captain.' It's more like Dickens's description of Fagin's den than anyone can imagine. And the Captain is like a purple-faced, fat Fagin with a military moustache!"

Just for a moment she snapped into vigour with that description of the Captain, and in spite of everything I giggled.

"Have you ever been there?" I asked.

"I have," she said bitterly. "Oh, I expect you'll think me a weak fool, but I had a sort of thing about being responsible for Julian . . . and I went there to—to show him I wasn't just being unreasonable and critical. . . . He rationalises about it, Delia. Sometimes he's Baudelaire seeking the stars through squalor and filth . . . and sometimes he's the poet in *Crime and Punishment*: He simply is out of reality.

"There's a telephone there," she added, "though no bathroom. . . ."

"Darling," I said, "don't worry too much. Ambrose, you know, is on our side."

"I was only wondering," said Gilda, "if I ought to telephone. I mean—suppose the line is tapped. I mean it *might be*."

"I shouldn't think so," I said, rather pompously I suppose, rather pleased with myself for being so matter-of-fact. "And anyway, there's nothing wrong with ringing up and asking him to meet you. That's not compromising."

"No—it's not, is it?" said Gilda with enthusiasm.

She went off to telephone in the hall and came back looking worried to say that Julian wasn't there and hadn't been in all night.

I didn't like that, and it suddenly occurred to me that there

was no mention of the murder in the morning papers . . . so —so there was no reason for Julian to know about it unless . . . well, unless! But I didn't say anything like that to Gilda. . . . If it hadn't occurred to her, then there was no point in giving her more to worry about.

The telephone rang suddenly and I went to answer it, because Hester, our daily, doesn't hold with the telephone, and The Parent spends his mornings in splendid isolation writing his book on archæology, about which he has all sorts of theories which are totally opposed to the theories of all practising archæologists.

It was actually Julian at the other end of the line. He sounded pompous and superior, but I remembered that when he was a small boy he'd been like that when he'd done something stupid and was scared someone had found out.

"Hullo, Delia," he said. "Long time no see. . . . Is Gilda with you by any chance?"

"By a curious chance she is," I said politely. "But why did you imagine she was?"

"Oh," he said casually, "I've been ringing all the places I could think of where she might be, and you came into my head."

"Oh," I said thoughtfully. "Well, I'll see if she wants to talk to you."

"Don't bother," he said carelessly. "Just tell her to come along and meet me in the usual joint off Wine Street, will you? Tell her it's important."

The telephone clicked off. I stood there for a moment or two feeling most peculiar. It was a long time since I had seen Julian, and I wondered whether he always conducted his telephone conversations in such a lordly and abrupt manner, and why on earth Gilda or anyone else put up with it. I mean, Ambrose can be maddening and bossy—but he has some manners, and doesn't take me for granted.

I went back and reported to Gilda, and a brilliant colour swam into her cheeks and she began to gather up her bag and show signs of bolting off without even a coat.

"Hi!—hold on," I said. "You need a coat, and I'm coming with you."

She went more scarlet than ever.

"I'd rather go alone," she said.

"Listen," I told her, "if you do, I know where you're going, and I'll come after you anyway. Don't be an ass. Two heads are better than one, and all that. . . ."

I wasn't sure whether I was really doing the right thing or not, but I was fairly certain Ambrose wouldn't want her meeting Julian alone and perhaps being persuaded into something absolutely hopeless, so I stuck to it, and Gilda gave way with a bad grace.

She went upstairs to get her coat, and I found Hester and told her I was going shopping in case either The Parent or Ambrose enquired for me.

When Gilda came downstairs again she had put on some make-up and looked fairly well integrated, and as either going in a bus or walking is sheer murder to the nerves when there's a crisis on, I went wild and took a taxi.

Chapter Four

JULIAN was sitting in a corner of a small café. It was an artsy-crafty little place and phoney. Bad pictures by bad painters hung on the walls with optimistic price labels stuck in the right-hand corners. The proprietress wore a smock and had her hair cut like an Italian urchin. There were scruffy little blondes wearing sandals who acted as waitresses. Their lustreless yellow hair hung down to their overall collars in a cut that was neither a bob nor a Veronica Lake style—just nothing at all. They looked like peroxidized Bisto kids. A pallid young man wearing a grubby shirt and blue cotton pants that looked as if they had been soaked in oil and then dragged along a dirty road sat with a thunderous looking brunette in another corner. They seemed to know Julian and kept glancing at him inquisitively, but he was pretending to be absorbed in a newspaper and not to know they were there.

"Hullo, Julian," said Gilda nervously.

He put down the paper pompously.

"Hullo, Gil," he said, and gave what we used to call his cat's smile when he was small.

Then he saw me and his eyes flickered.

"And *Delia*!" he said unctuously. "But how delightful."

He looked much the same as I remembered him, only his eyes were rather tired and popped out a bit as they always did when he was nervy. His hair was like the hair on Greek statues, falling in thick curls all over his head, and it needed cutting. He managed to produce his noted puckish smile. It had once been quite unself-conscious and spontaneous, but now I guessed he used it deliberately. Probably because he'd been told it was fascinating, but it had lost its charm—for me anyway.

"Have some coffee," he said.

"Look, Julian," said Gilda in a low voice, "I didn't come

out just to sit in this dreary little hole and fester with you. I can't stand it here, let's go somewhere and have a drink."

He put on a prim look.

"I haven't any money," he said, "I can't afford to go to better places."

"The coffee here," said Gilda in a goaded voice, "is more expensive than Lyons and not so good."

He gave his cat's smile again and I knew that he used this sort of irrelevance as a weapon against Gilda and that she never failed to react in the way he wanted. She was on the defensive immediately, just because she had some money of her own.

"We'll go and have a drink," I said firmly.

"You'll have to pay, darling Delia," said Julian, but there was a hunted look about him in spite of the flippant impertinence.

As he went out the proprietress smiled at him in a knowing way.

"Good-bye now, Julian pet," she said. "What a life, isn't it?"

The scruffy little girls smirked and the pallid young man gave a loud snort.

"For heaven's sake," said Gilda when we got out of the place, "how can you stand it?"

"Beggars," said Julian, looking at me sideways and managing his puckish grin again, "can't be choosers."

It was obvious that he could always put Gilda off balance, and she went to pieces when she tried to cope with him. She did it again.

"Oh, be quiet," she said in a strained voice. "We've got to talk. What about Theo?"

We were walking along a little street with gay houses and window boxes and a self-conscious air of, "What a fascinating, Bohemian little street I am." Sunshine fell in slants of gold and made blue shadows on the pavement.

"Oh, yes," said Julian in a thin quiet voice. "Theo! Someone strangled her, didn't they? In your flat, Gil?"

"Yes, Julian," said Gilda.

"I didn't do it, Gilda," he said in that thin voice. "I didn't do it."

Gilda half stopped and then walked on.

"How did you know, Julian?" I asked steadily. "How did you know? It isn't in the papers yet!"

"Julian. . . ." said Gilda in a dead, stricken voice and I could have kicked myself.

But all he did was give his cat smile.

"What an unpleasant mind you have," he said. "If you must know, Paul Nineveh was naturally informed of his wife's death. . . . He doesn't like me. He seems to think I did it. There are quite a lot of people who don't like me, Gilda."

I knew it was put on, it was a bid for sympathy, but that didn't stop a wave of pity going through me. He looked so young and there was always something of little boy lost about him. . . .

But it had an appalling effect on Gilda. I suppose it was sheer relief at finding he had a real reason for knowing about Theo, but suddenly she stopped dead and began telling him everything that must have rankled inside her for months.

"I thought you said they all liked you so much," she said hysterically. "I remember when we smashed up and you went off with that ghastly crowd of scroungers and petty spivs, you said so proudly, 'They like me,' and I told you they only bothered with you because you had some money . . . and now you see. Now. . . ."

"Gilda!" I said quickly. "Don't!"

Julian's face had gone pinched and contemptuous, but hurt and uncertain all the same.

"Let's go back to my place," I urged. "We can talk there. . . ."

"We've been followed," said Julian suddenly and he went white as a bone. "Don't look round like that, you idiot."

"There's only one man," I began, "and he doesn't look . . ."

"I know a bull when I see one," said Julian furiously. "Come on—let's go."

"A what?" echoed Gilda dumbly.

"Gestapo, a dick, a detective," said Julian in a frightened, aggressive voice.

"Oh," said Gilda helplessly, "what a beastly way of talking."

"For heaven's sake," said Julian, "don't be so South Kensington."

There it was again with both of them—veering off into non-essentials! What on earth did it matter what Julian called detectives, when he might be suspected of murder. Still, I did get a sense of shocked surprise. What I mean is that young men with whom you have been brought up oughtn't to have attitudes of mind or use phrases that were—well—to be snobbish, out of his social standing. And the way Julian said 'bull' was so horribly natural, and one had the idea that only people who were definitely of the criminal classes used that sort of thieves' cant. And besides, I didn't want to believe it. One simply wasn't shadowed by the police. The Parent would be furious . . . and Ambrose. . . Well, Ambrose would be abominably patronising and I told you so.

There was a taxi cruising past the end of the street and I hailed it and told it to go to the Ritz. Why the Ritz came into my head I simply don't know, unless I felt that at a place like that policemen would not be allowed in.

But I'd been right about going there. In its vast and shadowed space one could sit and talk with a sense of complete privacy.

"Prodigiously expensive," said Julian affectedly, and his eyes popped more than ever.

Then he changed round and collapsed into fatigue and pallor.

"Gilda," he said, "I think I'm going mad."

A cold, logical side of me thought—"That won't help you, my poor Julian. Too many people have thought it was a good thing to be mad when they were in a bad jam."

"Julian," said Gilda slowly, "where's the key of my flat?"

"I've lost it," he mumbled.

"When did you lose it?" she insisted.

"I don't know," he said and moved his head from side to side with a frightening effect of fear.

"Julian!" persisted Gilda.

"I haven't an idea," he mumbled. "Any of them might have pinched it." He looked at me. "You know what they are."

"I don't know what they are," I said unhappily.

But Gilda had her mind fixed on one thing only, and that was what had happened last night.

"This is serious," she persisted and sounded bossy and almost nagging. "Have you got an alibi for last night?"

Julian said almost under his breath, "No—I was with her . . . most of the evening."

"Oh, Julian," I exclaimed.

"Oh, God, it's ghastly," he said. "When I heard about it, I felt sick. They all think it was me, or pretend to think so. And one of them . . . stole that key. They'd steal anything. It's like living in a monkey house."

It wasn't any good saying, "Then why did you go on living there?" He'd obviously thought it so Bohemian and exciting—so colourful. And now this. If only he hadn't looked so *young*.

He went on talking like that for some minutes . . . about how untrustworthy his companions were, and how greedy, and how they scrounged. It was all too awful and what was he to do. He was so full of self-pity that my own sympathy began to fade a little. Then with the most amazing egoism . . .

"Isn't that house of yours free now?" he said. "You only let it for six months, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Gilda slowly.

He was silent for a minute and then smiled.

"We'll go back there," he announced. "I can rent a room from you for a few weeks, until this is over. I've still got some money left and—I'm awfully fond of you really."

It felt as if my jaw had dropped from sheer astonishment. I could hardly believe I'd heard him say that. I remembered when Julian had walked out on Gilda, of her pain and his bland indifference. And of things Gilda had told me when she was absolutely lost . . . how he'd jibed at her house and her dull life . . . and said he wanted freedom and a 'classic purity' towards life. And now here he was not caring tuppence that it must have been the most appalling shock for her finding Theo Nineveh in her flat . . . just full of egoism and self-pity. And now she was to move back into her house and provide a haven for him, start all over again looking after him and bolstering him up. It was rather frightening meeting an ego so large and relentless and really rather stupid. But perhaps all overgrown egos are stupid. . . .

"You see," he went on eagerly, not even noticing that Gilda had not spoken, "we can be together and private, and we can discuss things and I can work everything out. They don't like me, Gil, and they'll try and pin this on me."

"Julian," said Gilda urgently, "when did you leave Theo last night?"

He shrugged impatiently.

"I'm not sure, I'll have to work it out," he said. "You know what it is, one goes round and has a drink here and there and meets people . . . and Theo dashes off with someone, but you don't notice the time."

"Well, who did she dash off with?" I asked.

He looked at me with positive dislike.

"I didn't notice," he said. "She means nothing to me. Why should I notice who she goes off with?"

"Julian," said Gilda desperately, "you'll have to be more precise. They'll ask you all sorts of questions."

"I know," he said impatiently, "that's why I've got to be with you, Gil. Then I can relax and think. I've got to be with someone I can trust."

"She was like a rabbit in front of a snake. I saw her giving way inside her, I saw she was glad he wanted it to be like that."

"All right, I'll move back," she said slowly.

"Good," said Julian, and immediately became alert and almost gay now that he had got his own way. "Come on, we'd better get busy. We'll go round to the agent and get the keys and then we'll get some food in and then we can talk. Come on, this place gives me claustrophobia."

They neither of them took the slightest notice of me and Gilda got up like an automaton. Well—I thought grimly—this will teach me to think I know how to manage people . . . or anything at all, and I only hope Ambrose never hears of it.

Coming back into the sunlight, it was as if one had been in an aquarium, dim and cool and silent. The light was dazzling and the roar of the traffic seemed to plunge at me.

Then I heard a gentle, velvety voice saying: "Good morning, Miss Herring, good morning, Mr. Cleghorn."

My heart did a lurching drop.

"Good morning, Miss Brown," said the velvety voice.

"Good morning," I said coldly.

Pennell was with him. He stood there looking impassive and wary.

"Mr. Cleghorn," said Mellor, "I must ask you to come with us. There are some questions we would like to ask you."

It was all very quiet and unobtrusive, but there was a police car drawn up by the curb with a uniformed driver, and I was sure it wasn't just for questioning. They had made up their minds. They'd found out something.

Julian began to expostulate in a silly high-pitched voice.

"Now, Mr. Cleghorn," said Mellor suavely, "think of the ladies. We don't want a scene. . . ."

Julian crumpled up. He sagged, and I felt sick with pity for Gilda.

Pennell caught Julian as he crumpled and helped him into the police car.

"You've got a friend here, Miss Herring," said Mellor with an awful, impeccable courtesy. "Don't worry. He'll have every chance to prove himself in the clear."

"Gilda," Julian screamed from the car, "get me a lawyer. Do something."

"I will," said Gilda huskily, "I'll do anything. Oh, Julian, Julian. . . ."

Mellor got into the car and it slid away. Then I felt a hand on my arm and turned and saw Ambrose.

"Why didn't you do something?" I said furiously.

He paid no attention to me at all, except to glance at me with a severe, bored look. It was to Gilda he spoke.

"Hold up, Gil," he said kindly, "we'll get a lawyer and all the doings. Not to panic."

"What are you doing here?" she said in a dazed way.

"Well—" said Ambrose, "I suppose you might say that I've been keeping tabs. I thought I'd better be on hand. Let's get a taxi and go home."

"So we were being followed," I said stupidly.

"Obviously," said Ambrose coldly. "I thought I could rely on you to use your brains, my poppet, and keep Gil out of the way, but I suppose you had a fit of sensation hunting."

"Nothing of the kind," I said indignantly, but he wasn't listening, and I knew it wasn't any good arguing with him now.

He waved his stick at a prowling taxi, handed Gilda in, stood back for me to get in unaided, and then got in himself and slammed the door.

He told the man where to go and then looked at Gilda who was sitting bolt upright with tears streaming down her face.

"Julian was for it," he said gently. "You must have known that, Gil dear. He's not a popular chap and the whole lot had got the wind up. So they threw him to the wolves . . . but he may be able to clear himself at once. They haven't arrested him, you know."

What struck me most forcibly as the taxi moved on was that the traffic was still roaring by and people were walking about and talking. Somehow there ought to have been silence. People just couldn't be arrested for murder and no one notice it at all. Because, of course, no matter what Ambrose said, he was as good as arrested. Just like all the men you read about in the papers. "A man went to the police station as it was thought he could help the police with their enquiries." They hardly ever came out again.

Chapter Five

WHEN we got home Gilda came out of the coma in which she had sat in the taxi. As soon as we got inside the house she said to Ambrose coldly:

"I want to get hold of Gull. He will get a lawyer and all that sort of thing for me. It's quite plain to me that you are working with the police."

"Really . . ." I began, but Ambrose interrupted quite firmly.

"Shut up, Delia," he said. "You've done enough for one day. All right, Gil, as a matter of fact Gull will be along any minute now. I got him at his paper while you were all sitting in the Ritz. Arrange what you like with him."

It's very annoying the way Ambrose can make me feel small. I mean he was being quite unjust, because after all it wasn't my fault that the police had been following Julian round, and if he knew all about it, then the least he could have done was come into the Ritz and warn us. And I intended to tell him just that the moment I got a chance to be alone with him.

"And," said Gilda in a choked voice, "I'm going to do what Julian asked me to. I'm going back to live in my own house. I don't care what any of you say."

"All right, my dear," said Ambrose.

"And I'm going straight away," she went on. "You can tell Gull where to find me. He can bring my things. I'll be at my house."

She walked straight out of the front door and left me with Ambrose, who was regarding me with an affectionate and maddening sympathy.

"Bit the hand that fed it," he observed.

"But she's mad," I stuttered.

"Gull can cope with her," said Ambrose indifferently.

"She's as egoistic as her friend Julian. Come along into the morning-room and cool down."

In the morning-room I did cool down. I saw plainly that it had really been a bit ridiculous of me to think I could manage Gilda and Julian. I didn't know either of them well enough, but I did think Ambrose might have telephoned me and told me what was going on.

He'd flopped down into a chair with his legs stretched out in front of him and his hands in his trouser pockets. He began to whistle softly while he stared out of the window. It was never any good trying to talk to him when he was like that, so I went and fetched The Parent's best sherry and poured him out a glass.

But he continued to whistle and stare out of the window until Gull arrived, and then he sat up and took an interest in the sherry.

It seemed that Gull also had been 'keeping tabs.' He had strolled into the Captain's place after he had left us, and found it like an ants' nest that had been stirred up. They were scurrying round and getting rid of things that should not have been there, and they all had the most ghastly wind up.

He heard about Gilda without showing any great surprise, and merely shrugged.

"I'll go along and see what she's up to later," he said to Ambrose. "In the meantime I got on to Macklin this morning, and if they do charge Julian with this, then the *Morning Crier* will put up the cash for his defence."

In the clear light in the morning-room I could see Gull clearly. I hadn't looked at him properly before. The scar on the left side of his face showed up badly and made a pucker at the side of his eye. Usually he sat so that you could not see it. He had an attraction that is difficult to explain. Perhaps it was his voice, which was gentle but with a hard edge; or the flicker of a grin that touched his lips at the most unexpected moments.

It did now.

"We've got to take this impersonally," he said as if excusing himself.

"I agree," said Ambrose. "That's why I object to Delia barging in and trying to be the heroic friend."

"I think I am taking it impersonally," I objected. "I just think Julian didn't do it, if you want to know. But it's not because it's *Julian*. I can't tell you why. I'm even prepared to admit that in certain circumstances Julian might be capable of doing it, but he didn't. So why has Mellor, who seems to me to be quite a competent policeman, arrested him?"

Ambrose chuckled.

"Mellor isn't gifted with feminine intuition," he told me. "However, that was a beautiful speech. Now I'll tell you—Mellor has quite enough grounds to make an arrest. Julian was out with Theo last night. Everyone knows he had a key to Gilda's flat, because being what he is, he told people so. Theo, last night, according to people who saw her, was more than usually herself, which is to say she was slightly tight and out for trouble. Boon companions have informed the police that everyone in that crowd was broke, which is not unusual, and Theo tried to make Julian cash a cheque. He wouldn't. It appears that he is incredibly mean in some ways. As one charming lad said: 'If Cleghorn put his hand into his pocket, moths would fly out.'"

Gull frowned.

"I know," he said, "I've seen him about a lot and he is like that. But to be fair I think it's part of his weakness. He wants to be thought strong-minded, and by refusing people he thought he showed a superiority . . . he scored off life."

Ambrose grinned amiably.

"All right," he said, "I appreciate your wish to be absolutely fair and say all you can in favour of the accused . . . but it's not relevant, except in so far that as a result Theo suggested that there might be a drink in Gilda's flat. And added for everyone to hear that Gilda wouldn't make a fuss about anything Julian did, and that they might go along and collect a bottle. . . . Julian, according to the others, put on his potty look, and off they went."

"I've never been quite sure," said Gull, "whether that potty look is completely assumed, or whether it's real."

"How do you know about Julian's potty look?" I asked. "I think it's real. It used to come over him when he was a kid and anything happened that excited or embarrassed him."

"Dear Delia," said Gull, "in the course of my nights and days I see quite a lot of the Bandar-log. I've seen quite a lot of Julian. Oddly enough, knowing that Gilda cherished him, I have on occasions kept him out of trouble. It's a pity I wasn't around last night."

"He *must* have been potty," I said.

"Yes," said Ambrose. "Potty—but not all that potty. It was pretty low—and remember I also have known Julian off and on since he was a kid. When he's doing something that he *knows* is low, he puts on pottiness as a kind of alibi."

"The Macnaghten ruling," murmured Gull.

"But he didn't kill her," I said obstinately.

I don't know why I was so sure, but I was.

"Well . . ." said Ambrose, lying back in his chair again. We have this. . . . Mellor has this. Julian, who is known to be peculiar, almost potty (he batted some girl on the head a few weeks ago and sent her flying down a flight of stairs just because she was a little insistent about something), goes off with Theo, who is a provocative and unpredictable creature. He goes to Gilda's flat with her with the intention of bringing back a bottle or two of Gilda's gin or whisky for the Bandar-log and Theo to drink. He is seen later looking pottier than ever around the Captain's place, and when asked where Theo is, he says he doesn't know and cares less. Paul Nineveh has told the police he thinks Julian has done it. . . . He says that Julian is violent and unpredictable. *And* another tenant in that block of flats remembers seeing Julian at about ten o'clock running madly along the corridor and down the stairs. He says Julian looked quite demented. Julian's finger-prints are all over the place . . . and there we have it."

Gull said nothing.

"Can't we do something?" I urged.

"We'd better do something," said Ambrose grimly. "Because there is one other thing. It may appeal to you, Gull. There was only one plain 'print on the wireless tuner and that was Gilda's. Now Gilda was very late coming to the Billhook and it is well known how she loathed Theo Nineveh. . . . You can take it for a certainty that Mellor will want to know where she was before she arrived—and whether she left the wireless on when she left her flat."

"But that's damn nonsense," said Gull angrily. "*We know* that Julian went with Theo to the flat."

"And left it before or about ten o'clock," said Ambrose. "Gilda did not arrive at the Billhook until half-past ten. Her flat is only ten minutes away from the Billhook. . . . If Julian can clear himself, Gilda is at least suspect."

"Then let him hang and be damned," said Gull.

Ambrose shook his head.

"Sorry," he said, "that won't do. And has it occurred to you that Gilda, being in the infatuated and neurotic state she is in, is quite capable of taking the rap if it is going to save Julian?"

"I think," said Gull morosely, "we'll go down to the solicitors Macklin has hired, and get very busy."

"I don't think," said Ambrose thoughtfully, "that Mellor's case is strong enough for a charge yet—unless Julian makes some statement that justifies it."

"The trouble with that young man is that he thinks himself clever," said Gull. "He thinks he's smart. He'll talk himself into trouble. Let's go. We'll snatch some lunch on the way."

The solicitors were very impressive and efficient. They were criminal lawyers, Ambrose said. Not criminals themselves, I don't mean, but they didn't go in for respectable old-fashioned business, but just defended burglars and forgers and people.

The firm had a long string of names, but Mr. Pride was the one with whom we dealt, and he was quite young and horribly exuberant. He shook hands with all of us with all the zeal of an American business man and talked about Julian as if he was something inanimate, without any will of his own.

"Mellor hasn't got anything watertight," he said when Ambrose had finished telling him everything.

"It looks nearly watertight," said Gull. "Mellor usually knows what he's doing."

"I'll get through and see if they've still got Cleghorn there," said Mr. Pride. "If they have I'll go straight down and see him. Nice lot of pals he seems to have—all of 'em eager to hand him to the hangman."

It didn't seem to enter his head that Julian might be innocent. His whole attitude was that, with any luck, he might get away with it.

Gull said, "Give us some time and with any luck we'll find the chap who did do it."

Pride looked hurt and shocked. As if the idea of Julian's being innocent was a disappointment and we were depriving him of a really good chess problem.

He picked up an inter-office phone and told his clerk to get through to the police station and find out if Mr. Cleghorn was still being interrogated, then put it down and smiled at us widely.

"We'll have Gibbsby-Simonds if we can get him," he said.

"If we need him," said Ambrose amiably.

I got the impression that he didn't much like Mr. Pride.

The phone on his desk buzzed and he snatched it up.

"Well?" he said. "Oh! Right. Tell them I'm coming down. Yes—and speak to him if you can. Tell him not to talk till I get there."

"Yes," said Gull gloomily. "Stop him making statements. He's the kind who rushes into statements, specially if the police seem friendly."

"Yes," said Pride. "Friendly—with knives. All right. I'll get busy. Where'll I contact you?"

"Contact Macklin," said Gull, "and I'll contact him."

Chapter Six

AMBROSE took me home and planted me down with instructions not to try and be a detective, but to get on with the Clavering job. Apart from being engaged to him, I act as unpaid secretary and general stooge. I don't quite know why I do this, but I got into the habit of it when I was about sixteen and used to think him wonderful in uniform. The Clavering job was dull, but needed concentration. It consisted of sorting out the muddle he had got his rare stamps into, putting them into groups to be checked by Ambrose later, and then cataloguing.

"What are you going to do?" I asked suspiciously.

He hesitated.

"Look, Delia," he said, "I don't want you taking any part in all this. I've got an idea that there's a lot more to it than appears at the moment. . . . I hope to goodness Gull succeeds in persuading Gilda not to stay on in that house of hers. Anything could be planted on her."

"Planted?" I echoed. "But I thought . . ."

"What did you think, my dear nitwit?" asked Ambrose blandly.

"I don't know," I told him doubtfully. "I think I got the impression from Gilda that—well, Theo makes passes at people and that—that—"

"That Julian was one of those unfortunate people who are a bit haywire about that sort of thing and apt to go berserk?" Ambrose suggested helpfully.

"About that," I agreed.

I wasn't very clear as to why people should go haywire about that sort of thing; it seemed to me that it would be quite easy to snub people off . . . but Gilda didn't think so, and nor apparently did Ambrose.

"Well, I daresay she's right," said Ambrose in his most

quelling voice. "So you can see plainly that you don't want to be mixed up with those sort of people, do you?"

"No," I said crossly, "but then I never did want to be mixed up with them in any way. What little I've seen of them is quite enough."

"Well," said Ambrose abruptly, "if it were as simple as all that, just a question of Julian repelling Theo's advances too violently, then it would be grubby and sordid, but simple. I've an idea it isn't that way at all. . . ."

That gave me a small shiver down my spine, and I said meekly, "Then you don't think it was Julian?"

"I haven't any idea at all at the moment," said Ambrose. "I'm going to amble round a bit. You get on with that Clavering job."

"All right," I said gloomily, "but I feel a bit bothered about Gilda—the way she went off, for instance. She's awfully wrought up."

Ambrose grinned suddenly.

"Don't worry, my poppet," he said, "Mellor will soon scare her back into the fold . . . if not this fold, then that of the Palfers."

I rather thought I'd prefer her to go to the Palfers'. Emmie, I was sure, could marlage her much better than I could, and The Parent would be no help. He'd already retreated back to his book, and had probably forgotten all about her.

I said so and Ambrose nodded.

"That's what she'll probably do," he said, "as soon as she finds that Mellor is likely to make a habit of calling round and having little chats with her. By the way, I'll take you out to feed this evening. Have you got a grubby sweater and a pair of those peculiar tight-fitting pantaloons?"

"I have not," I said with dignity.

"Oh well—slacks then," said Ambrose, "and don't bother to brush your hair too much or anything—we are going among strange company. If you look normal, you'll be a marked girl!"

He went off looking thin and elegant and donnish and at the door called back, "If Gull calls up, take a message."

In spite of being determined I couldn't really concentrate on

Clavering. I felt vaguely guilty about Gilda—chiefly because I didn't really like her very much. And so I wondered whether I'd tried hard enough to stop her being an idiot and going off like that.

The telephone rang about half an hour after Ambrose had gone, and it was Ambrose himself, but all he said in a sepulchral affected voice, was "Don't talk to Mellor."

"Why should I?" I asked.

"Just don't," said Ambrose. "He may drop round in a snake-like friendly way. Just don't be led into a pleasant chat. If he wants to know anything about last night's do at the Billhook, refer him to me. Just be your natural muddle-headed self and flutter a bit."

"Honestly . . ." I began, but the telephone clicked off.

It rang again about an hour later and this time it was Gull. He sounded disgruntled and tired.

"They've charged Julian," he said. "They found the clock and the money in his room. He says they were planted. . . Where's Ambrose?"

"I don't know," I told him. "He'll be back later. Oh, Gull—how frightful. Have you seen Gilda?"

"I'm with her now," he said rather grimly. "Don't worry. I'll look after her. At least the clock and money business lets her right out."

Well, that was something, I thought. He said he'd ring back later, and I returned to Clavering and his beastly stamps. I hated it all, and the weather had suddenly changed and become overcast and rather cold. Also I felt tired and remembered that I'd had hardly any sleep last night.

"Well," I told myself, "if Mellor has made up his mind it's Julian, at least he won't come round bothering people with what Ambrose calls pleasant chats."

I gave up Clavering and went upstairs and found a pair of slacks that I'd intended sending to the cleaners; I also fished out an old sweater that I'd used on a fishing holiday with The Parent. I'd look pseudo-Bohemian all right, I decided, and tied up my hair in a pony tail with a tartan ribbon, and hoped Ambrose would like it. I tried not to think about Julian. It simply didn't do any good thinking about him, and I got a beastly lump inside every time I did so. After all, I may not

have liked him much, but I had pulled his hair and once screwed up his ear when we were both kids.

I went downstairs again and met The Parent coming in from a jaunt to the British Museum. He looked at me with a faintly surprised air, smiled cheerfully, and said, "Spring cleaning, eh?"

I let it pass. I frankly didn't feel like going into explanations, but it did make me wonder whether I'd achieved quite the effect Ambrose meant. The young women in Julian's milieu might prefer make-up to soap and water, but I was pretty sure they didn't look as if thoughts of spring cleaning came into their heads. However, it was the best I could do, but I did go upstairs again to accentuate the maquillage. By the time I'd finished I considered that Theo Nineveh herself had nothing on me.

Ambrose seemed to have much the same idea. He gazed at me with a maddening, dubious air, thought for a full minute, and then observed, "There's no doubt you do things in a very whole-hearted way. However, perhaps, it's just as well . . . no one will ever recognise you out of fancy dress."

At that moment The Parent roared from his study.

"If that's you, Ambrose, come here a minute, I want to show you something."

"Sorry," said Ambrose cheerfully. "No time. I'm taking Delia out to dinner."

"Nonsense," roared The Parent, "Delia's spring cleaning. She's not fit to be seen."

"Go on," said Ambrose, "go and wait in the car. I'll be with you in five minutes."

It was drizzling with rain when I got into the car, and suddenly I didn't like the idea of the evening at all. It was just like when Ambrose took me down to the Grogans' week-end party, and all those unpleasant things had happened; the poker party and the lilies and that woman suddenly having convulsions and dying. I had a sort of presentiment that things—unpleasant things—might easily happen tonight.

I said so to Ambrose when at last he got away from my papa, but he shook his head firmly.

"No," he said. "Don't worry. Just keep your ears skinned and look beautiful, but dumb. Be South Kensington going

Bohemian. You can know about Julian, because it's in the papers now. Show an infantile, but ghoulish interest."

He drove off through the rain, down toward the river and stopped outside some big gates that led into a dim courtyard, which appeared to be populated with uncouth stone figures. One side was quite dark and seemed empty, but the right side had a row of windows curtained in scarlet, through which light filtered, and past which shadows moved. There was a sound of music.

I remembered suddenly that I hadn't told Ambrose about what Gull had said, and told him quickly.

"That *does* let Gilda out," I repeated at the end.

"Umph," said Ambrose.

"But it *must*," I insisted.

All he answered to that was: "I hope so, my sweet, but I've an idea that it's all a bit tricky one way and another."

I got positively confused as soon as we got into the big studio where the club or whatever it was functioned. It seemed much too full, and all the lighting was so very shaded. There was a bar at one end, and a lot of narrow divans ranged along the walls, and in the middle of the floor couples were dancing. Some shuffled round locked in each other's arms and seeming in a coma, while others wildly jitter-bugged. In the dim lighting they all looked rather corpse-like.

A tall thin man sat at the door behind a deal table on which was a large exercise book, ruled off into columns for members' names, guests' names and all that. He looked elderly and rather sepulchral.

"Hullo, Merriman," he said without enthusiasm, "I didn't think this was your cup of tea. Sleuthing, I suppose."

"Just indulging my natural curiosity," said Ambrose. "But this nitwit here wanted to see the place. She'd probably like to become a member. She paints."

He looked at me and became slightly less sepulchral.

I smiled at him. I couldn't think what else to do, and wondered what on earth I should say if anyone started talking to me about painting. I hadn't any idea how one even began. . . .

He pushed the exercise book over to Ambrose, who scribbled in it nonchalantly and took my arm and removed me into the middle of the room where he solemnly danced me over to the

bar. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the sepulchral man poring over the members' book, evidently in hopes of deciphering my name. I rather thought he'd find it difficult. At the best of times Ambrose's writing is difficult and when he scribbles it's unreadable.

At the bar Ambrose ordered beer, rested his elbow on the sloppy surface, and gazed round benignly. I had a distinct impression that our arrival was not exactly causing any rejoicing. People seemed to be very interested, but they didn't actually look at us, only slanted sideways glances.

Ambrose chuckled suddenly, picked up both our beers, and led the way over to one of the divans. It was fairly isolated. There was an amorous couple about ten feet away, but no one else near.

"Joke?" I asked.

He nodded, and looked at a couple who were shuffling past. The man was tall and thin and wore a check shirt and blue cotton trousers, his lank dark hair fell over his left eyebrow and he had an expression of almost imbecilic ecstasy as he clasped a small plump blonde firmly to his chest. Her eyes were closed and she also looked ecstatic and was clad most unsuitably in narrow-legged pants and a thin yellow sweater.

"Awful," I said.

He chuckled again.

"God bless our police," he said.

"Oh *no!*" I expostulated.

"Constable Feenan and Policewoman Pink," said Ambrose complacently. "Still, we'll stay on for a while. I like things first-hand."

"I shouldn't think you'd have much chance," I told him. "It looks as if no one is going to speak to you."

"I can always speak to them," Ambrose pointed out mildly. "However, at the moment, there's no one here I want to speak to. I think we'll dance. After all, I'm supposed to have brought you here to enjoy yourself."

Ambrose can't dance really. He just pushes one round the floor, but on this occasion I supposed I'd have to put up with it, and it seemed as if there must have been some method in his madness, because after we had danced for some time, a tall, not bad-looking boy caught Ambrose by the elbow and

said cheerfully, "I think this girl has suffered enough. Allow me."

He slipped one arm round my waist and Ambrose relinquished me in a way that seemed positively insulting and slid off to the bar.

"Miss Delia Brown," said the young man cheerfully.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"Seen you round with Merriman," he said abruptly. "Strange as it may seem, I am not really a native of this haunt. I occasionally visit the upper regions."

"I can't imagine," I said rather smugly, "why anyone should come here. Anyone reasonable, I mean."

"Pomposity has set in," he remarked serenely. "Well, for one thing I write books, and for another I happen to know Julian Cleghorn. For another still, I deduce that Merriman is here for some good reason, probably on account of Julian—and you for the same reason. My name's Edward Gaunt, by the way."

I didn't say anything. I remembered what Ambrose had said about being beautiful, but dumb. I didn't feel at all beautiful, but at least I could be dumb. However, Edward Gaunt did not seem in the least to notice it. I couldn't help thinking he was really rather nice, but then probably he was being determinedly nice, and could easily be a bad type. Even one of the Bandar-log. He didn't look as if he would either scuttle or whoop—but one never knew.

However, he danced very well, and when the music stopped for a moment or two, he said, "Let's have something to drink. I want to talk to you."

I fluttered according to instructions, and he looked at me with an irritating amusement.

"You do it quite well," he said. "What do you like? Gin, whisky or beer?"

"If you really want to know," I said crossly, "I prefer Pimm's Number One."

I hoped that would shake him, because it's notoriously expensive; but he didn't seem to mind, and when I looked round for Ambrose he was engaged in conversation with a tall, glamorous brunette, and it was plain he wouldn't expect me to interrupt. I might have known. It always happens.

Edward Gaunt planted me on a divan in a corner and went off to the bar. The club was filling up now and I saw the thin man called Blink come in and go to the bar. He still looked horribly white and walked with a kind of listless shuffle. He didn't take any notice of anyone, though one or two people greeted him; but I saw him nod to Ambrose almost amiably.

Gaunt came back with a pint of Pimm's in one hand and a pint of beer in the other, and I felt rather silly. I mean I'd only meant to try and put him off, and he'd bought a whole pint, when a half-pint is expensive enough. Then it occurred to me that perhaps he thought if I drank a whole pint, I'd get confidential and I made up my mind he'd be disappointed.

I noticed that Constable Feenan and Policewoman Pink had planted themselves on the divan next to us. They appeared to be lost to the world and simply engaged in holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes, but I supposed that they both had excellent hearing. Well, it was no business of mine, and Ambrose must have seen them, so if he wanted to get me out of it he could desert his brunette and come and do something.

"Well, here we are," said Edward comfortably. "Do you know, I rather think I like you better in your normal state . . . when you wear pretty clothes."

"I like myself better," I told him.

"Still," he said, "I can see Merriman's point. You would certainly be pretty noticeable if you came here looking your usual self—but I hope he doesn't imagine that any of Julian's crowd wouldn't recognise you."

"I don't suppose," I said coldly, "that he cares."

"Perhaps not," he agreed. "But of course you'll only get told what any of them want passed on to Merriman for reasons of their own."

"If you really want to know," I said in the most petulant manner I could manage, "he didn't want me to come, but I insisted."

He raised one eyebrow and then smiled rather nicely.

"Never mind why you came," he said. "I'm delighted to meet you. Are you a friend of Gilda Herring's?"

"Yes," I said cautiously.

He frowned heavily.

"What a fool that girl is," he said. "Now listen, if you're a friend of hers, can't you persuade her to keep away from that place where Julian is hanging out? It won't do her any good going there, no one will tell her anything."

"I don't suppose she will go there now," I said. "After all, it was probably only to see Julian she ever went there."

He had very nice dark grey eyes that crinkled up at the corners and a candid look, but just now he looked purely contemptuous.

"Oh, don't play green goose," he said. "She was there this afternoon, just about lunch-time. Everyone knows . . ."

I wasn't sure what to say. I felt absolutely sick with worry. Of course, Gilda couldn't possibly have had anything to do with the clock and the money, but if she'd been there then Gull's idea that she was let out was wrong. How could she be so—so idiotic?

"Oh well," I said vaguely, "I suppose really when something awful has happened to someone one—one is fond of . . . the natural thing is to go round and see if one can find out anything . . . or help . . . or something."

And then I remembered Constable Feenan and Policewoman Pink, who were still sitting in a rapt silence on the divan close by. I swallowed a lot of Pimm's and said, with what must have seemed a disgusting coyness, "Do let's dance."

"All right," said young Mr. Gaunt obligingly and stood up. "But do try and stop her doing that sort of thing. . . . It's more likely to do harm than good."

He added as we started dancing, "You see, no one will tell the police she was there and that's probably a good thing, as I gather there is some kind of bother about a clock and money . . . which is very bad for Cleghorn, and Nineveh has it in for him . . . but it might not be at all good for her if any—idea got round that they'd been planted and she'd been there, if you see what I mean?"

I saw very clearly what he meant, and I wondered just how much Constable Feenan had heard. It was important, very important that Ambrose knew about it, and I had a fearful idea that it was too late. I mean that Mellor would be told about Gilda's visit. In that hot, swirling atmosphere, full of

smoke and talk and loud dance music, I felt muddled and nervy. I looked for Ambrose while we danced, but he'd vanished, so here I was stuck with this young man and suppose he got bored and wanted to go off on his own?

And it wasn't *like* Ambrose to desert me like this. A stupid sort of panic began to rise up in me, and just then the gramophone or whatever it was provided the music, stopped with a grinding whirr and had evidently gone wrong.

"We'd better get another Pimm's for you," said Edward calmly.

"I don't want another," I said abruptly. "Where's Ambrose?"

Edward looked at me curiously.

"What's the panic?" he asked. "I'll look after you."

"That's nice of you," I told him, "and I'm sorry I was rude just now. But—it's odd Ambrose disappearing."

"He won't have gone far," said Edward reassuringly. "Come and have that drink. He'll turn up."

Well, of course he would! It was quite stupid to get into such a tiz about it. As if Ambrose couldn't be allowed out of my sight for ten minutes. Besides, Constable Feenan and Policewoman Pink were still about the place, and if the worst came to the worst I could get them to do something.

We were up at the bar now, and the man Gull had called Brink was still there. He nodded to Edward, who nodded back in a friendly way, which rather surprised me, because I'd got the impression that Brink was just about one of the worst types among a lot of bad types. And Edward didn't really seem one who'd be on really friendly terms with bad types; but, of course, one could never know. After all, confidence men must have something, or they wouldn't be able to be confidence men.

And now that I came to look at Brink properly, he didn't seem so mad and dangerous as he'd looked in the Billhook. He looked ill and melancholy, and I remembered what Gull had said about him going to prison for manslaughter, and how Ambrose had said he wasn't so sure that it had been a proper verdict. It would have been too awful if he'd been sent to prison for something he didn't do.

The studio was quite packed now, and I thought I saw

Paul Nineveh talking to a girl, and thought how odd it was for him to be here when his wife had just been murdered . . . but it was so smoky and crowded that I couldn't be sure; and just then Constable Feenan shouldered his way up to the bar and said in a horribly discreet voice, "Miss Brown; something's happened. Will you come along with me?"

Chapter Seven

It was all rather confused. Edward Gaunt stepped in between Constable Feenan and me, saying something about frightful cheek and not annoying me. But Feenan said firmly, "Don't interfere, sir. This is a police matter." I heard Brink give a kind of gasp and then Feenan laid my arm and nudged me expertly through the crowd. Policewoman Pink was in the courtyard and it was raining. Some lights had gone on in the windows opposite and people were looking out.

"Don't worry, my dear," said Policewoman Pink in a warm, delightful voice. "Mr. Merriman has had a slight accident and has gone to hospital. We'll drive you there to see him."

She took me by the other arm and together they marched me out of the courtyard to a police car that stood outside the gates. I noticed that Ambrose's car was still there, and in the way small and unimportant matters catch at one in a crisis, I became positively agitated about it. And said so.

"That's all right," they said soothingly; "we'll look after that."

Then I was gently ushered into the police car, the door shut decisively and the car shot away from the kerb.

"Don't worry, Miss Brown," said a velvety, smooth voice. "Mr. Merriman has had a bad knock, but he's in no danger."

There I was shut up in a car with Inspector Mellor and bursting with information, which I was determined not to give him and which I felt horribly afraid he'd prise out of me.

"What happened?" I asked agitatedly.

"Well," said Mellor slowly and thoughtfully. "Someone took it into his head to bash your friend very hard on the head out in the courtyard."

"But what was he doing in the courtyard?" I demanded indignantly.

"That," said Mellor still more thoughtfully, "we probably

shan't know till he comes to and tells us. I've put a cordon round that studio, and left someone to question them all . . . but I don't suppose anyone will know anything."

"But—but why?" I insisted. "Are you *sure* he isn't in danger."

"Quite sure," said Mellor impassively. "As to why? Well, I should imagine that someone didn't quite like the idea of him—er—snooping."

"Ambrose doesn't snoop," I informed him.

"Well, possibly whatever he was doing was regarded as snooping by someone," said Mellor blandly.

I didn't say anything to that. After all, there really wasn't anything one could say without inviting him to snub me again.

"Exactly what did happen?" I asked meekly. "I mean who found him . . . and all that?"

"Feenan found him," said Mellor. "So far as we know he went out with some girl, presumably to get her a taxi. Feenan saw him go, and when he didn't come back went to have a look. . . . Miss Pink, you see, took the view that no man who had brought one girl to a party would go off and leave her in such a cavalier manner. So Feenan went out to look and found him lying under a large statue of what appeared to be some Neolithic man. So he took action. . . ."

"I could jolly well point out the girl to you if I saw her again," I told him with a certain amount of vindictiveness.

"Splendid," he said. "Pink only saw her back."

The car turned into some big gates and drew up outside a door that had a blue light burning over it, and the word 'Casualties' done in white on the glass shade.

"Here we are," said Mellor. "He may not be conscious yet, you know."

In the casualty receiving station a stretcher had just been wheeled in with a man who was moaning horribly, and I shivered somewhat, but Mellor walked straight ahead and into a corridor that was painted white, and where little signal lights winked on and off at intervals outside certain doors; the floor was covered with some rubbery covering, and not even Mellor's solid tread made a sound. It was all horribly uncanny and reminded me, for some reason, of the effect that certain German films give.

Ambrose was in a small, glass-enclosed cubicle and a man who was obviously a policeman sat by his side. A nurse was there, but she was doing something at a side table with a hypodermic.

I was furiously angry inside and desperately unhappy. Ambrose looked ghastly, and there was a bandage round his head. Just then a surgeon in a white overall appeared and said in a matter-of-fact voice: "He won't be conscious for a long time, Inspector. Possibly not for forty-eight hours."

"Tck-tck," said Mellor in a spinsterish concern. "Tck-tck."

Then he turned to me.

"This is Miss Brown," he informed the surgeon, "Mr. Merriman's fiancée."

The surgeon smiled at me with that awful reassuring air that is put on for the benefit of the laity.

"Someone had it in for your young man," he said sympathetically, "but luckily they didn't manage to get him fair and square. Something must have scared them and they muffed it."

Then suddenly he grinned in quite a human way.

"Seriously," he said, "he's got a very tough skull, and though he's badly concussed, there's no fracture, and he'll be all right."

Mellor said in that dark brown velvet voice, "Miss Brown was also engaging in a little amateur detection, that's why she's disguised in this way."

The surgeon chuckled suddenly, and although I did feel it was rather macabre people talking out loud with Ambrose lying there unconscious, and talking almost flippantly, still it was comforting and I did think it showed Mellor to be much more perceptive than anyone would have imagined, that he should explain the way I looked.

Somehow Ambrose was so far away, lying there in that white unconsciousness, that it didn't seem any good going near him and—well—touching him or anything, but I wanted desperately to do *something*. I went over and stood by the bed, but he didn't stir and he kept on breathing in a stertorous way.

I heard Mellor speak to the surgeon in a low voice.

"It's a gamble," said the surgeon. "I can't tell you, Inspector.

I should say the odds are he won't remember anything at all.'

"Tck-tck," said Mellor again.

"I'll leave my colleague here," said Mellor finally in a resigned voice. "Just in case he does say anything. Now I'd better take Miss Brown home."

"Can't I stay?" I said quickly.

"Not much point in it," said the surgeon. "No—you go home. Come round as early as you like. But there's really no point in staying on."

I had a positively Victorian impulse to insist on sitting by Ambrose's side in case he did become conscious for a moment and would like to see me there; but I knew that Ambrose himself would think that quite ridiculous, so I bent down and kissed him. That, too, was probably ridiculous, because he wouldn't know I'd done it, but I suppose I must be a bit Victorian deep down or something, because I couldn't help it.

Ambrose just lay there, and it made me feel suddenly lonely. The loneliest feeling I'd ever had. I shouldn't have felt so lonely if he'd been in Africa or India or anywhere, because then I should have known that I was in his mind, and there would have been that link between us, no matter how far away he was; but now it seemed as if there was nothing. I wasn't going to cry in front of Mellor, though I might easily have howled my head off in front of the surgeon, so I did the stiff upper lip line and said, "All right, Inspector, let's go."

But he was really rather decent as we went back along the rubber-floored corridor and past those sinister little winking lights. He gave me an avuncular sort of smile.

"Now listen," he said; "while that young man of yours is out of action, I want you to promise me something. . . ."

"What?" I asked warily.

"No amateur sleuthing," he said, with great solemnity. "If you hear anything or see anything—or if your friend Miss Herring sees or does anything and confides in you, have a little sense and come to me. Don't go in for a schoolgirl sense of ethics . . . mustn't sneak, you know. I promise you you'll do more harm than good. . . ."

"Look, I can't promise that," I expostulated. "I mean if she told me something in confidence. . . ."

He was suddenly sharp and severe.

"Listen," he said. "This isn't the mystery of the locker in the Upper Sixth—this is murder. Very well—either refuse to let her confide in you—or do the sensible thing and come to me. Your friend Miss Herring is not very stable, you know."

I didn't answer that, because I didn't know what Ambrose would have wanted me to do. Anyway, he'd told me not to chat with Mellor. I decided I'd wait for a while, anyway until Ambrose was able to talk to me . . . and then I'd ask him.

Mellor didn't say anything more either. He just stumped out of the hospital, put me in the police car and drove me home.

Just as we got to my house I thought of something.

"They planted the clock and the money," I said. "But where's Theo Nineveh's bag?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," he said, without any friendliness.

He waited until I had let myself in with my latchkey and that was that.

The Parent was safely in bed when I got in. Some people might say that he was a bit casual about the activities of his only daughter, but then he knew I was with Ambrose, and come to that, ever since I was about sixteen he'd more or less taken the view that as long as Ambrose was around, I was both safe, occupied and entertained.

I was half-way up the stairs when the telephone rang and my heart thumped. I thought it must be the hospital ringing up to say that Ambrose had collapsed or something; but when I answered it was Edward Gaunt.

"Hullo," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right," I said indignantly.

"No need to be so heated," he said calmly. "Only I saw you go off with battalions of Gestapo, and wondered whether you were after some noted female crook . . . and then I heard a rumour that your boy friend had been bashed or something."

"Oh," I said, "why did anyone think that?"

"Be sensible," he said briskly. "You don't imagine that all that hoo-ha could have gone on in the courtyard without someone noticing."

"No . . ." I said.

"How bad is it?" he asked abruptly.

"Bad enough," I said warily.

"I'll be round tomorrow," he said and rang off.

You know, it's a very odd thing, but without Ambrose around to make a background, I felt suddenly insecure and just about as dumb as Ambrose had instructed me to be at the beginning of the evening. I really rather liked Edward Gaunt and felt pretty sure he was all right, but without Ambrose to vet him, I didn't know where I was. The Parent wasn't any good. He would merely say to have nothing to do with the young man. And anyway, he was quite detached from all this. I don't suppose he really remembered now what it was all about.

However, in that I was quite wrong, because next morning at breakfast he abandoned *The Times* and fixed me with a choleric and very blue gaze.

"Look here," he said, "if young Julian is in a mess . . . then he'd better go to my solicitors or something. He's a young fool and a mannerless cub, but he's not a murderer."

"I know," I said, "but as a matter of fact, Gull has fixed for the *Morning Crier* to put up the money. . . ."

"Tchah!" said The Parent in the most conventional way imaginable.

"And they've got a solicitor," I added.

"One of those infernal criminal lawyers," exploded The Parent. "Shows you're a c*ock merely because you employ them. What Julian needs is a nice, respectable firm. . . . Shows him to be a respectable person."

"But he wasn't," I said glumly.

The Parent didn't explode again. He's very disconcerting over these things. Not at all consistent. Sometimes one would think he was almost modern.

"No," he said. "I suppose he wasn't. Trouble was his father and mother never made any sense. Did the boy no good. Confound it."

There was a silence. I hadn't told him about Ambrose yet, because I knew quite well that if I did, he'd begin to fuss and think he ought to keep an eye on me. I could see myself between him and Mellor being put in protective custody.

Suddenly he sighed deeply.

"That's the worst of it, my dear," he said slowly. "We can't rely on anything nowadays. Once one could be sure at least that young men and women born into a certain social status, brought up as gentlemen and gentlewomen, would not do certain things . . . but not now."

There wasn't anything I could say. It was so much too true. You only had to read the papers.

It was at that moment that Edward Gaunt chose to call on me. Our daily came in and said, "There's someone to see Miss Delia. . . ."

"Good heavens, what an hour to call," said my papa. "Who is it?"

"I don't know," said the daily.

"Well, go and find out!" roared The Parent.

"The police, I suppose," he added gloomily when she had scuttled away. "Really, Delia, I'm very fond of Ambrose, but I could wish that he wasn't perpetually mixed up with the police."

"Ambrose . . ." I began nervously, when the daily scuttled back.

"It's a Mr. Gaunt, sir," she said.

"Gaunt?" said The Parent and looked at me with a definitely unfriendly and suspicious glare.

"Someone I know," I murmured.

"Not even relations have the right to turn up at breakfast-time," said The Parent.

Then he glared at the daily.

"Show him in!" he roared.

I hadn't wanted Edward Gaunt shown in at all. I couldn't imagine what on earth I was going to say to him in front of The Parent . . . and still worse, he would probably immediately say something about Ambrose . . . and I would have to explain why I hadn't told my father about him immediately.

"Not even Ambrose," grumbled The Parent, "is so uncivilised as to turn up for breakfast."

"I don't think Edward wants breakfast," I said, and instantly knew that I had sounded pert and silly and guilty.

But at that moment Edward Gaunt was ushered into the

room and I was relieved to see that he looked normal and conventional in a lounge suit. His brown hair was neatly brushed and he didn't in the least look like what Ambrose called the Seacoast of Bohemia.

"Good morning, sir," he said pleasantly. "Good morning, Delia. I'm sorry to come rushing round at this hour of the morning, but I've just gathered some information that might be of interest."

The Parent was still glaring at him, and I realised that the ritual of introduction had not yet taken place, and until that had happened The Parent could not speak.

"Daddy, this is Edward Gaunt," I said hastily. "Edward—my father—Captain Brown."

"How do you do, sir," said Edward courteously.

"How d'you do," said The Parent.

It was obvious that he felt strongly that information that incurred visits to breakfast must be of sufficient importance to justify itself, or else . . .

"Well? . . ." I said nervously.

"This is strictly between ourselves for the moment," said Edward, "but it seems pretty sure that the chap who bashed Ambrose was Paul Nineveh."

There it was.

I saw The Parent become purple in the face and his eyes bulged out of his head.

Edward Gaunt looked at him with deep concern.

"Delia," he said sorrowfully, "hadn't you told Captain Brown about Ambrose?"

"She had not," said The Parent in a choking voice.

"I was going to tell you," I said hastily. "Last night someone hit Ambrose on the head and he's in St. Mildred's hospital. He's badly concussed . . . but he'll be all right."

"Indeed," said The Parent, in a dangerously quiet voice, "and where, might I ask, were you while this went on?"

"I was—I was in a club with Edward," I said meekly.

"While someone hit your fiancé on the head?" asked The Parent in the tone of voice that his generation can use to make you feel obscurely cheap, when it's most horribly unjustified.

"I was going to explain, sir," said Edward, "that I was

merely keeping Delia company while Merriman investigated something. I did a little investigating myself afterwards. . . .”

“And who brought my daughter home?” demanded The Parent.

“The police,” I said.

An expression of deep disgust permeated my Parent’s features.

“Sir,” said Edward quickly, “I made a few investigations myself afterwards . . . and I am sure that it was Paul Nineveh who attacked Merriman . . . and more, I am pretty certain that the reason was that Merriman might conceivably clear Julian Cleghorn . . . and that’s not desired by one or two people.”

“Why didn’t you go to the police with this story?” asked The Parent suspiciously.

“I did,” said Edward. “But for some reason they did not seem to believe me. But I’m pretty sure all the same.”

“Why?” I asked suddenly.

He shrugged slightly.

“Paul and the brunette went off together just at the time Merriman was bashed,” he said indifferently. “Merriman went out with the brunette. She’s an artist’s model by the way, who rejoices in the name of Manon. She’s the type who would dramatise herself that way. Nineveh went out immediately after Merriman and Manon. . . . A lad I know, who is not in the least mixed up with the Nineveh-Manon-Bandar-log set-up, was coming in at that time. He saw Nineveh and Manon hop into a taxi—but he didn’t notice Merriman under the statue as he came through to the club.”

The Parent muttered something which I thought sounded distinctly blasphemous under his breath.

“Bandar-log?” he asked abruptly.

“Kipling,” Edward explained politely. “Journalist called Gull christened that particular crowd Bandar-log. Very apt. Money, morals and manners.”

I saw my papa begin to unbend. He chuckled.

“Have some coffee,” he said. “Delia—make some more coffee.”

“There is plenty,” I informed him. “I’ll just percolate it again.”

"Why didn't the police believe you?" he asked Edward.

"For the very simple reason," said Edward quite blandly, "that when it came to the point, this lad who told me denied it all. He isn't in with the Bandar-log—but he's dead scared of them. And when he found out what was going on and that Merriman had been conked and that Nineveh and Co. were mixed up, then he just shut up like a clam. However, you can take it from me that it is so."

He looked at me with a singularly charming smile.

"And as your boy friend is out of action for the moment," he said, "I thought you might like to take me on as a deputy for the time being. You need someone to keep tabs for you."

"My daughter," said The Parent in an awful tone, "does not need anyone to keep tabs for her. She will not take any further part in this very sordid affair."

"But she will, you know," said Edward Gaunt. "If you really look at it sensibly, she won't be able to keep out of it."

Chapter Eight

I SUPPOSE really I must be very weak-minded or something, because although I was determined not to have anything to do with Edward until Ambrose was better and able to vet him, I found myself co-operating with him without quite knowing how it came about.

For one thing The Parent took one of his fancies to him—simply because he'd been in the navy during the war. That always softens my papa. And for another Edward was rather like Ambrose in a way. He had just the same manner of taking it for granted you were going to do what he wanted you to do.

And what he wanted that morning was for me to let him drive me round to the hospital first, see how Ambrose was, and then go and have coffee with him while he worked out some way of coping with Paul Nineveh. He just didn't seem to like Nineveh at all.

"The police," he said, "made such a shi-shi last night, that it's pretty sure all the Bandar-log will go to ground and won't be seen round that studio for a week or two. But they regard me as an amiable idiot who's looking for copy and is good for a number of free drinks, so I *might* hear something. They can't help chattering. . . ."

Well, the end of it was we drove round to the hospital, and I saw Ambrose, but he was still unconscious, and there was still a detective sitting by his bedside, so I went back to Edward, and he took me to rather a nice place where they had lovely coffee. He was really rather nice and told me quite a lot about Julian. He seemed pretty sure that no matter what idiocies Julian indulged in, murder wasn't one of them. And he said, which rather surprised me, that he didn't like Gilda.

"But why?" I said.

I didn't go for Gilda much myself, but I didn't dislike her. I just thought she was rather weak, and too inclined to be sorry for herself.

"She's a limpet," he said. "She runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds for another thing. Still, we might go along and see her."

"I don't know where she is," I objected.

"I do," he said. "She's staying with those Palfers. I rather thought she might go there, and I telephoned this morning, and she is."

In response to my expression of amazement, he added, "I happen to know Emnie Palfer rather well.

"Have another coffee," he added encouragingly.

I wasn't sure whether I wanted another coffee or not, but while I was trying to summon up enough strength of mind to tell Edward that I wasn't going with him to the Palfers', and that I wasn't going to do anything at all until Ambrose was better, Brink came into the place, saw us and without any hesitation at all came over and sat down next to me.

"Look here," he said to Edward aggressively, "what's all this yarn you've been telling the police about Manon being in cahoots with Nineveh and luring that chap Merriman out into the courtyard for Nineveh to slug?"

"It's not only my yarn," said Edward negligently. "It so happens that two other people saw him go out with her."

"And I'm telling you this," said Brink with a kind of controlled fury, "try minding your own business for a change. Manon has no time at all for Nineveh. . . ."

"She went off in a taxi with him," I burst out, and Edward kicked my ankle most painfully under the table. Ambrose has done that on occasions and I just managed not to say 'Ouch,' but bore it in stoic silence.

"Who told you that?" Brink asked rudely. "This Nosy Parker?"

"No," I said flatly.

"Then who did?" he demanded. "Whoever it was, is a liar."

"Oh," I said inadequately.

"What happened exactly," said Brink, spacing out his words with an air of great accuracy and impressiveness, "was that Manon went into the courtyard with Merriman, who did get her a taxi, and she went off in it. Merriman was quite all right when she left. Understand that?"

"Yes, old boy," said Edward cordially, "and it will be quite

easy to check. The police will contact the taxi-driver . . . so what are you worrying about?"

"Yes," said Brink, "and that's exactly what they will find out."

There was a long silence. Edward offered me a cigarette, lit it for me, then offered one to Brink, who refused it as if he had been offered some loathsome insect.

"Well," said Edward at last, "perhaps we'd better go along and see Gilda."

Brink turned and stared at me. His thin face looked pale and strained, and was tightened into lines of dislike and anxiety.

"Do you know this type well?" he asked. "Because if I were you, I'd be rather careful about getting mixed up with him."

"I'm an old friend of the family," said Edward firmly.

He took hold of my elbow and literally yanked me out of my seat.

"Come along," he said. "Good-bye, Brink. . . ."

He paid the young man behind the coffee bar and stalked out into the street. I glanced at him doubtfully and saw that instead of being annoyed, as I should have expected, he looked genuinely amused.

I suppose I must have looked bewildered, because he grinned down at me.

"Don't worry," he said. "Brink has a 'thing' about the Manon, and a positively pathological dislike of Nineveh. He's simply sick at the idea that she went off with Nineveh."

"Are you sure she did?" I asked as I got into the car.

He didn't answer until the engine had started and we were driving along towards Victoria.

"I can't see why Tommy should have said he saw her, if it wasn't true," he said at length. "Personally, I think it's true, and that Manon denied it to Brink, because she's scared of the scenes he makes."

He drove in silence after that until we pulled up in front of the Palfers' tiny house, which was one of a small, elegant terrace of Georgian style situated behind a big, gloomy square.

Then he switched off the engine and sat staring thoughtfully in front of him for at least a minute.

"Of 'course," he said, "there are other brunettes, and it's pretty dark outside that courtyard . . . but . . . oh, well, the police will sort that out."

"I thought they didn't believe you?" I said.

He shrugged slightly.

"They'll check just the same," he told me.

"Why do we want to see Gilda?" I asked as we got out of the car.

He looked down at me and his face was serious.

"I'm not just being a Nosy Parker," he said, "but the point is this—if Merriman wasn't out of action I'd talk to him and let him get on with it, but I've a feeling that it's a question of striking while the iron is hot. People—particularly Gilda—have a habit of fitting facts to fiction, trimming them to fit whatever theory they have. Particularly when they've had a little time. I've just got an idea that someone might let something drop by chance . . . and I don't want Julian to go for the high jump."

"Do you like Julian?" I asked doubtfully.

"I think he's as split as they come," he said, "and a very unhappy creature—but I served in the same ship with him . . . and he has a very good side. Besides, I don't believe he did it."

Well, that, I thought, was at least something.

"Then aren't you in danger of trimming facts to fit your theory?" I suggested.

"No," he answered thoughtfully. "I think I'm capable of keeping sufficiently detached to avoid that. Anyway, I'm merely collecting bits and pieces, which might be useful to make a pattern. . . ."

He gave his sudden youthful grin as he rang the front door bell.

"I shall give all my jigsaw pieces to Merriman," he said, "and he can fit them together."

I supposed he was right, really. It was the way Ambrose had worked things out down at Grogan's. Just mounded about and listened really and watched. . . .

The door was opened by Emmie, who stared at us with a rather disconcerted and unwelcoming look.

"Hullo, Delia," she said doubtfully. "Hullo, Edward."

What I mean is there was no 'Nice to see you—step right in' attitude at all.

Edward, however, was far from disconcerted himself.

"Hullo, Emmie," he said, "is Gilda in? There was a slight schemozzle last night, and it's rather urgent that she's told about it all."

At that moment Gilda came out of a room on the right-hand side of the small, gay hall. She looked sallow than ever, and sulky. She made no bones at all about not wishing to see us.

"It's no good, Delia," she said in rather a shrill voice, "I'm not talking to you—or anyone. Specially not to you. You and Ambrose are really nothing more than a couple of—of coppers' narks!"

I was so astounded that my mouth fell open. What I mean is, I didn't mind being called a coppers' nark—that was too childish to mind. And I was ready to make allowances for how Gilda was feeling about everything. But what did shock me was that she used that term . . . and a queer, indefinable vulgarity in her voice and manner.

"Don't be ridiculous, Gilda," said Emmie in the tone of a headmistress reproving a third-form infant. "Not only ridiculous, but offensive."

"I don't care," said Gilda. "Look what happened when I trusted her and took her to see Julian. . . . She just kept us in the Ritz until Ambrose was able to collect the police and bring them along."

"It wasn't like that at all . . ." I began indignantly, when Edward nudged my elbow and I subsided.

"Well," he said blandly, "it wasn't Ambrose who told the police about you going to the Captain's residence yesterday lunch-time. . . . I wonder how many other coppers' narks you know."

Gilda went a horrid, sickly colour.

"Why shouldn't I go?" she demanded. "Anyway, the clock and the money were in Julian's room before I went. . . . Rannie said . . ."

Emmie gave her a quick, quelling look and she stopped dead.

Then Emmie turned to us and said in her warm, rich voice and with a warm, rich smile.

"You see how it is. . . . She's quite overwrought, poor child. She won't talk to anyone except Gull and Rannie. . . . Rannie heard from someone—Gull, I think—that the police searched Julian's room in the morning. . . . It was foolish, really, of Gilda to have gone there—but—understandable, don't you think?"

Her voice had become indulgent and superior, asking us to understand like sensible adults—and go away. It was very plain she wanted us to go away. And it became equally plain that Edward understood, because he smiled at her in a conspiratorial way.

"Of course," he said, "Of course. Come along, Delia. We're not wanted."

"It's not that," said Emmie quickly. "I'd love to ask you in—but you do see how it is. I've stayed away from my job to help Gilda. . . ."

"She needs help," said Edward cryptically. "Well—good-bye for now, Emmie."

She hesitated.

"What happened last night?" she asked.

"No doubt Gull—or Rannie will hear about that and will tell you," said Edward blandly. "Information from tainted sources is no good to Gilda."

He took my arm casually, turned and sauntered back to the car. I was still bubbling with shocked indignation and couldn't say a word.

Edward said thoughtfully as we got into the car, "I do wish your young man would come to. I've an idea things are not at all as they ought to be."

"I didn't think we discovered much," I told him gloomily. "We only got insulted."

He didn't answer that directly, but seemed to be concentrating on his driving.

"I would have said Gull was a reasonably detached and intelligent person," he said at last. "I know he's more or less in love with Gilda . . . but that shouldn't deprive him of all judgment."

It didn't seem to me to be very important, so I said nothing except to comment on the fact that we appeared to be going back to the hospital.

"We are," said Edward. "No one is more anxious than I am to hand over to Ambrose Merriman. . . . I shall live from moment to moment in a palpitation until he's fit enough to think again."

He only vouchsafed one more remark until we got to the hospital.

"I wonder why Rannie told Gilda that the police found those things in Julian's room *before* Gilda got there," he remarked. "Because, as a matter of fact, they didn't."

"How do *you* know?" I asked.

He drove into the asphalt parking-place in front of the hospital, stopped the car and sat staring in front of him for a moment or two.

"The police were round at the Captain's about seven o'clock yesterday morning," he told me. "Julian had already gone out, which was unusual enough in itself, or possibly had been out all night. They didn't do any serious searching . . . but they asked a lot of questions and went away again. They returned about two o'clock, went straight to Julian's room—and found the clock and the money. I had this from one of the denizens of the place, and it's the truth. Now does all that suggest anything to you?"

He added, before I could answer, "In the meantime Gilda had been there."

"But you can't mean that Gilda . . . ?" I exclaimed.

"Obviously not from what we know of Gilda," he said. "But the police cast a wide net. I think the whole business was a plant . . . and equally some kind soul telephoned the police and suggested where the things were. . . . It all confuses the issue beautifully. Don't you see?"

I did see, and it made me feel rather scared. I remembered something that Edward didn't know—the fact that the only fingerprint on the wireless knob belonged to Gilda.

"Added to which," Edward went on thoughtfully, "the Captain's place is like a rabbit warren, with people scuttling in and out all the time. Anyone could have been there and planted it . . . nobody would have noticed. And, in any case, it's obvious that someone wants it to be Julian. . . ."

I, too, wished very much that Ambrose was well again. Quite apart from the beastly unhappy feeling I had about him being

hurt like that. I hadn't any feeling of confidence in Mr. Pride—and somehow I didn't feel too sure about Gull.

"Let's go and see how Ambrose is," I said miserably.

As a matter of fact what the nurse seemed to think was that a miracle had happened. Ambrose had become conscious again. Naturally he wasn't in a fit state to talk, and they said he must have a skull of cast iron, but he was back again.

They let me see him for a short while, and he managed a pallid smile.

"Not to worry," he murmured. "I'll be up and about tomorrow."

"You certainly will not, Mr. Merriman!" said the nurse sternly.

"No fracture," Ambrose informed her faintly. "Just a nasty conk on the head and a spot of concussion. . . ."

I grinned down at him as cheerfully as I could.

"You'll have to do what you're told for a change," I informed him.

"You mustn't stay any longer, Miss Brown," said the nurse.

"I'll look in this evening," I told Ambrose firmly.

"I may have remembered by then," he said, and closed his eyes peacefully.

When I told Edward about it he whistled cheerfully.

"Thank heavens for that," he said. "Delia—if he's at all fit enough, wangle me in to see him."

We went out to lunch together and got the afternoon papers. They reported the inquest, which had been adjourned. And then they reported that Julian had been up before the magistrates charged with the murder of Mrs. Theodora Nineveh and remanded for a week.

The afternoon loomed emptily before me, but Edward suggested we go to the cinema to fill up time, and I really did begin to feel that he was quite a nice person.

Chapter Nine

NEXT day Ambrose insisted on coming out of the hospital. The Parent had been to see him the night before, and between them they had arranged for him to be brought to our place in an ambulance and to be looked after there with the aid of visiting nurses and his own doctor. Personally, I thought it was wildly irresponsible of both of them, but nobody took any notice of what I said. And Ambrose's doctor, a man called Crayshaw, merely said that it was simpler to let Merriman have his own way, and that he had nine lives in any case.

We put him to bed in the spare room, and he announced that he would sleep for three hours and then would like conversation and tea. No sooner had all this happened when Mellor appeared, with the silent Pennell behind him. Fortunately The Parent had gone to the British Museum or something, because he would probably have been rude to them—the only thing he grumbles about with regard to Ambrose is that he will associate with policemen.

I knew that Edward proposed to call round some time in the hopes of seeing Ambrose, and I didn't think he would want to see Mellor. Or that Mellor would approve of him much. I gathered that Mellor, reluctantly, would condescend to co-operate with Ambrose, but I couldn't see him welcoming Edward as a collaborator.

"Hullo, Miss Brown," said Mellor, with a nice shade of deference in his velvety voice. "I hear that Mr. Merriman is distinctly better."

I nodded.

"Can I see him?" he asked.

"Not for three hours," I told him firmly.

He appeared to be revolving this information round and round in his mind, and at last he said, "Might we sit down? I have an idea that you might help us about last night."

"Do sit down," I said ungraciously.

I mean, what was I supposed to do? I could hardly throw them out, but how on earth I was going to have a nice conversation with them without saying anything I couldn't quite see.

"And I can't help you about last night," I told them.

Mellor gazed mournfully at his hat, which he twirled round and round between his knees.

"Perhaps your attention was being purposely diverted from Mr. Merriman," he said.

My heart gave a sickening sort of thud. After all, Edward had been rather—well, rather determined to keep me occupied. Then I reflected that Ambrose knew perfectly well who I was with, and if he'd had any reason to think him a bad type he wouldn't have left me with him like that.

"I don't think so," I said coldly.

"Mr. Gaunt is an old friend of yours?" asked Mellor.

"Not exactly," I said. "But Mr. Merriman knows him."

Pennell made one of his little squiggles unobtrusively in his notebook and I wanted to scream. The next thing would be that Mellor would tell Ambrose that Edward was an old friend of his, and Ambrose would deny it. . . . But there was nothing to be done now, and I thought it was odious that my belief in Edward was being attacked. Because it was.

"Mr. Gaunt seems very interested in Mr. Cleghorn," said Mellor dreamily.

I simply paid no attention. After all, he hadn't been speaking directly to me.

Then without warning he dropped the dreamy pose, and became purposeful.

"Miss Brown," he said, "I wonder if you would mind telling me why Gilda Herring left this house, where she would have been protected and which is the obvious place for her to be in a case like this?"

"Why should it be obvious?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"Well—she is a relative of Mr. Merriman," he said. "And she is in a most unpleasant position."

Well, after all, Gilda is twenty-nine and in an advertising firm, and, as Ambrose says, advertising is a very toughening school to be in.

"You'd better ask Mr Merriman, then," I said stiffly. "Beside"—it came out before I could stop it—"she considers Mr. Merriman and me to be coppers' narks."

Penne I never moved a muscle, but Mellor began to shake with silent laughter. It quite transformed his heavy stolid face, because oddly enough it became positively merry.

"I don't mind telling you," he said, "that Mr. Merriman did his best yesterday morning to persuade me not to pull Mr. Cleghorn in. But I had my own reasons for doing so. Coppers' narks!"

"Well, that's what she thinks," I said crossly. "And I don't mind telling you, I find it insulting."

"No doubt," he said soberly. "I wish I could pull that young lady in. It would be in her best interests, but unfortunately the law doesn't permit of protective custody in this land."

"You don't mean she's in danger?" I exclaimed.

"From herself chiefly," said Mellor glumly. "I'll have a word with Mr. Merriman about it when I see him."

He relapsed into reverie again and went on twirling his hat round and round. I supposed he intended to sit there until Ambrose's three hours were up, so I said politely that I had things to do, and would he excuse me; but to stay as long as he liked.

He smiled at me in a disgusting avuncular way.

"Thanks, Miss Brown," he said. "By the way, was there any particular reason why you took Mr. Gaunt to see Mrs. Palfer yesterday?"

I went quite scarlet and was furious with myself for doing so. I had absolutely nothing to feel guilty about, but something in the way he spoke made me feel guilty and embarrassed.

"I went to see how Miss Herring was," I told him.

"But why Mr. Gaunt?" he persisted in his most velvety way.

"Well, if you really want to know," I said furiously, "Mr. Gaunt doesn't believe Julian Cleghorn is guilty any more than I do—so he came along to see if he could help."

"And what grounds has Mr. Gaunt for this belief?" purred Mellor.

"He just knows it's not the sort of thing Julian would do," I said.

"And has Mr. Gaunt any theory as to who did ~~kill~~ Mrs. Nineveh?" asked Mellor sarcastically.

"I don't know," I said wrathfully. "You'd better ask him."

"I think I will," said Mellor. "Have you known the Palfers long?"

I was suddenly stung into rebellion. I remembered the Sage in Alice.

"'I've answered three questions and that is enough,'" I quoted and marched out of the room.

When I was outside the door I wondered suddenly why that particular question had annoyed me so much. It hadn't annoyed me so much as frightened me. But why? And I knew then with absolute certainty that I didn't like Emmie Palfer . . . and she was not a nice person. And she wasn't a good person for Gilda to be with. I couldn't think why Gull didn't realise that. It was the sort of thing he ought to realise—being a journalist and all that. Journalists are supposed to know people. I wasn't very fond of Gilda just now, but I had an uneasy feeling that I ought to do something about her . . . but what I couldn't think.

The house was very quiet. There was no one in the kitchen and sunshine slanted in through the windows and made everything rather theatrical. I wished Edward would come along. I could take him into the morning-room and Mellor needn't know. After all, he had no right to enquire who I let into our house. But no one came and the time dragged by. I tried to do some work on the Clavering collection, but I was listening all the time for the front door bell. Or the telephone. And it occurred to me that it was odd that Gull hadn't contacted us at all. He probably knew about Ambrose and he might have enquired. Or had he gone right over to the opposite camp? It didn't strike me at the time how queer it was that I should have suddenly lumped Gilda and the Palfers together as the 'opposite camp.' But I knew that there had been hostility behind Emmie's rich warmth. . . . Ambrose could say it was imagination if he liked, but I knew it was so.

Then the telephone rang with that shattering effect of alarm it achieves when everything is very quiet, and you've been waiting for something to happen.

I rushed to answer it, feeling sure it was Edward and wanting

to tell him that Mellor was here, and not to come himself until later.

It wasn't Edward. It was a voice I knew, but couldn't really place. Then I was almost sure it was Brink speaking. The voice sounded hysterical and yet venomous.

"Hullo," it said. "Is that Miss Brown? Yes? Well, is Gaunt there?"

"No, he's not," I said. "Who is it speaking?"

"That doesn't matter," said the voice. "I suppose your house is lousy with police as usual. Never mind. You can tell Gaunt that Manon has disappeared, and if it's anything to do with him, he'll wish he'd never been born."

The line went dead and I was left feeling rather dazed, with the receiver still in my hand, when the door of the drawing-room opened and Mellor came out.

He looked at me and then came forward with that lumbering walk, took the receiver out of my hand, listened into it for a second and then put it back on to the rest.

"Better tell me what that was all about," he said.

I suppose I must have looked rather peculiar, because he slipped one hand under my elbow and more or less led me back into the drawing-room.

"You look pretty shocked," he said in a matter-of-fact voice, "so I take it, your caller wasn't a friend. . . ."

"He was rather horrible," I said at last. "I—I think it was a man called Brink. . . ."

"Brink," said Mellor thoughtfully. "Pennell . . . give the station a ring and tell them to put someone on to Brink, will you? He could bear a little investigation. Now, Miss Brown, what did he want?"

I wasn't going to bring Edward into it. But I didn't see that it mattered telling what he had said about Manon.

"He said someone called Manon had disappeared," I told Mellor.

"Why should he think that would interest you?" said Mellor.

Well, of course, I might have known I'd either got to tell everything or nothing.

"Well," I said, feeling bothered and uneasy, "he seemed to think that Edward Gaunt might be here . . . and—and that Edward might know something about it. But it's nonsense."

Mellor smiled grimly.

"I remember," he said. "Your friend Gaunt told us something about a young lady called Manon and Paul Nineveh. We looked into it . . . but no corroboration was forthcoming. However, if Mr. Brink bothers you again about the matter, you can inform him his friend Manon is quite safe. She is in Holloway, as a matter of fact, charged with a small matter of being in possession of stolen goods. Mrs. Nineveh's handbag, to be precise."

"But——" I gasped.

"I'm not telling you any more," he said, still grimly. "But you can tell Brink, if he rings up again. I don't mind him knowing that."

Just then the bell from Ambrose's room tinkled. He was an hour ahead of his three hours.

"That's Ambrose," I said. "I'll go and see what he wants."

Chapter Ten

AMBROSE appeared slightly amused to hear that Mellor and Pennell were in the house.

"Bring them up, my pet," he said, "I'd like to hear what the latest is. I'd rather like to know if they can tell me exactly who knocked me out."

"They can't," I told him. "They expect you to tell them."

"I haven't a clue," he said cheerfully. "I seem to remember you were happily occupied in fascinating a good-looking young man . . . and I was talking to a sultry sort of brunette . . . and that's all."

"You were," I said coldly.

"You might bring up some tea after you've shown Mellor and Co. up," said Ambrose.

"Very well," I said still more coldly. "And it may interest you to know that your sultry brunette is in gaol."

"Oh lord, what an idiot Mellor can be," said Ambrose. "Go along, Delia, bring him up."

"She was in possession of Theo Nineveh's handbag," I told him smugly.

"Then she had no right to be," he said crossly. "Really, all this Bandar-log business . . . hopping about and shoving false clues all over the place. Where on earth do they think it will get them?"

It was obviously no use arguing with him. If he was convinced that this Manon female was a sweet innocent, then plainly he was still suffering from the effects of concussion. Perhaps Mellor could make him see sense.

However concussed he was, he still possessed his diabolical ability to know just how I was feeling.

"I suppose you are firmly convincing yourself that this unfortunate girl went with Theo Nineveh's murderer, watched it happen, and picked up the bag as a kind of commission," he said as I got to the door. "Be your age, darling."

From what I had seen of Manon I would not have been surprised to hear she had committed the murder herself, but I simply ignored Ambrose and went downstairs to Mellor and Pennell.

They both seemed relieved to be able to do something definite, and plodded upstairs after me with a kind of heavy rhythm.

Ambrose greeted them with what I felt was unnecessary enthusiasm and sent me downstairs to make tea. It was the maid's day out. Of course it would be, so I couldn't do anything about it. And I knew that Ambrose would say everything important before I got upstairs again. But when I did get upstairs I found they were waiting for me before they really began to discuss anything. Ambrose, it appeared, took a different view of Edward Gaunt from that of Mellor.

"He's all right," said Ambrose languidly.

"None of them are all right," said Mellor flatly. "Not one of them. Take it from me."

"He's not one of them," said Ambrose.

"Well, he's always around them," said Mellor. "He goes to that sordid little dump where they all hang out . . . he *knows* them all."

"I know," said Ambrose, "you can't touch pitch without being defiled. However, he writes books and looks for copy. Take it from me, Mellor. He's all right. And now tell us more about Manon, who presumably lured me to destruction and how it happened that the Nineveh's bag was found in her possession."

"Well, it's a bit odd," said Mellor slowly. "I sent Feenan down to look her up and question her about last night. She swore blind that you took her out to get her a taxi and one happened to come along at once; she got into it and went off, leaving you turning back into the courtyard. She says she didn't see Nineveh. Well, she's a temperamental young woman and Feenan pressed her rather, so she flew into a temper, jumped up from the divan and the handbag fell out from among the blankets. She made a dive for it, but it had burst open, and letters had spilled out addressed to Nineveh. She wouldn't say where or how, so Feenan took her along and held her at the station until he got hold of Nineveh himself,

who said it was his wife's bag and he couldn't imagine why Manon was in possession of it. She refused to give any explanation, said she knew nothing about it, hadn't even known it was there among the blankets, and swore it was a plant. (The bed wasn't made when Feenan arrived.) She insisted she had gone home alone, had been alone all night and no one had called on her. So Feenan booked her on a charge of being in possession of stolen goods and the magistrate remanded her in custody for a week."

He looked suspiciously at Ambrose.

"Are you sure you don't remember anything more than going into the courtyard?" he said.

"I don't even remember going into the courtyard," said Ambrose blandly.

Mellor looked distinctly disbelieving, but he dropped the subject and went on to Gilda. The fact that she wasn't staying here seemed to irk him and he asked Ambrose if he didn't think it would be a good thing if she came back from the Palfers.

"After all, she's your cousin," he said reproachfully.

"Twice removed," said Ambrose, "and she is much more friendly with the Palfers than she is with Delia."

Mellor looked down his nose.

"Well, it would be as well if they stopped her running round to that lodging-house in Abel Alley," he said dreamily. "I suppose you don't know that she was there the afternoon of Mr. Cleghorn's arrest. And at a time that wasn't very good for her supposing anyone had had any suspicions that she might be interested in planting that clock and money. . . ."

"I didn't know," said Ambrose. "But it's an absurd notion, isn't it? She's in love with Cleghorn."

Mellor sighed deeply and stood up.

"Well, well," he said, "maybe you'll remember later what happened in the courtyard. By the way, it may interest you to know that Cleghorn now admits going to Miss Herring's flat, but says he went there alone about ten o'clock, because he was afraid that Mrs. Nineveh might have got hold of his key in some way . . . and when he got there he found her dead, lost his head and bolted. Thin, don't you think?"

"I have a headache," said Ambrose mournfully. "I can't think about it."

"Well, we'll be going," said Mellor. "Hope you'll be feeling better tomorrow."

Ambrose gave a pale grin.

"So that you can come and third degree me about that brunette," he said. "I expect I shall have a relapse."

Mellor gave a heavy smile and lumbered towards the door.

"Show them out, poppet," said Ambrose in an expiring tone, "and then come back with lumps of ice and wet towels."

I showed Mellor and Pennell out as requested and went back to Ambrose, who was now sitting up and looking far from expiring.

"Shove some pillows behind me, dearest Delia," he said, "and then sit down and tell me what's been going on."

I put plenty of pillows behind him, and he grinned shamelessly.

"I thought you were feeling exhausted and ill?" I said.

"I have got a slight headache," he said. "Hand me the aspirins. But it's only the sort of headache one might expect. I do wish Mellor wouldn't go round locking up all my most promising leads."

I couldn't see how the brunette was promising and said so.

"Don't be dense," said Ambrose. "Do you imagine people would tuck Theo's bag among her bedclothes if she wasn't some kind of danger to them? She's so dumb that she might know something without even knowing she knew it, and so blurt it out without wishing to do anyone any harm. Poor silly creature."

"So you don't think it was Julian?" I asked.

"No—I don't think so," said Ambrose thoughtfully. "Only don't go round saying I said so. I've an idea that it would be very much better for various people to think we believe that Julian did do it."

He looked at me seriously.

"It's important, moppet," he said, "and safer. So—not even to your friend Gaunt do you suggest that I think Julian is in the clear."

There wasn't anything to be said to that, only it gave me rather a gruesome feeling inside—a child sensation that nobody was to be trusted at all, and I was suddenly prompted to tell him about Gilda and what she'd said. And once I'd started

I got it all out, the interview and what Emmie had said, and about Brink's telephone call and everything. Ambrose listened with an unfamiliar taut look about his jaw, and when I'd finished, he scowled.

"Haven't you heard anything from Gull?" he asked.

After all, it was curious that Gull hadn't contacted us at all. He couldn't think we were coppers' narks, and he'd seemed sensible enough when it all happened.

Ambrose rubbed his chin pensively.

"Of course," he murmured, "the man's supposed to be in love with Gilda, so it's humanly possible that he doesn't much *want* Julian cleared. All the business of getting his paper to put up the cash could simply be his natural journalistic instinct. It's time I was up and about again, honey child."

"Don't be stupid," I said. "If you get up too soon, you'll only conk out again in twenty-four hours."

He didn't answer that, but sat frowning into space, and gently massaging his chin. By all of which I knew that I might just as well not have spoken at all.

When he did at last condescend to return, he said, "I wonder where your young friend Gaunt is. Didn't you expect to hear from him today?"

"Yes, I did," I said rather glumly.

"Look here," said Ambrose, with a sudden energy, "you keep out of all this, Delia. You keep right out. You don't have anything to do with Gilda or the Palfers. . . . Or any of them. Someone has gone quite haywire . . . and I haven't a clue who it is—yet."

"You don't think anything has happened to Edward, do you?" I asked.

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Ambrose.

"What do I do if Gilda or the Palfers ring up and ask me to go round or anything?" I asked.

"Tell them to come round here," said Ambrose firmly. "And that goes for Gull too . . . and your friend Gaunt. Oh yes, and if Brink rings again, put him on to me. I can stagger downstairs if necessary."

He closed his eyes for a moment and I saw that he was looking really white and tired now.

"You'd better go to sleep again," I suggested.

"Not a bad plan," he said quite meekly. "Look, Delia, put a pencil and some paper by my side. I might think of something and my memory's so dicky just now I'd lose it again unless I scribbled it down. Is your papa back yet?"

I shook my head.

"Well, then, if anyone calls, bring 'em up here," said Ambrose firmly. "Whoever it is."

"I don't think you ought to be disturbed," I said irresolutely.

"You're making me feel very ill," said Ambrose in a tone of martyred resignation. "Unless you promise to do what I tell you, I'll get up and come downstairs and answer the door myself."

They had taken off the bandage and put on a dressing with strapping, but he still looked alarmingly wounded, so I gave way hurriedly.

"All right, I promise," I said.

"That's a good child," he said with a return of his most smug and patronising manner. Then he closed his eyes and there was nothing for me to do but go away and be obedient.

The only person I really wanted to see was Edward. I was really worried about him, because I was pretty sure that he'd been going round doing exactly what Ambrose had warned me not to say he was doing—telling all and sundry that he believed Julian was innocent. In one way it relieved my mind a lot, because obviously it meant that Julian *was* innocent, and that whoever had done it didn't want any investigations going on; on the other hand I didn't want Edward to be bashed over the head or pushed into the river or anything. And it wasn't any good my telling myself not to be melodramatic, because Ambrose *had* been bashed on the head.

I really did wish that our daily was not having her afternoon off. It would have been a great comfort to know that she was about the place. She was a large, hefty person with an aggressive temperament and I'd have preferred her to answer the door on this occasion. Usually we had Lise, an Austrian girl who lived in, but she'd gone off for her holiday, and the odds were that The Parent would stay out to dinner. He was inclined to be rude about my cooking. I'd *have* to answer the front door if anyone

rang because it might be the district nurse arriving to cope with Ambrose.

There was no settling down to the Clavering job, I felt much too uneasy, so I switched on the radio and sat down to think things out. I wanted very much to know why Theo's bag had been found in Manon's bed. It didn't seem to make much sense. It all seemed aimless and quite pointless, and then I thought of what Gull and Ambrose said about the Bandar-log, and that added up. It was monkeyish and pointless. Unless—unless someone was deliberately trying to make it all seem monkeyish and pointless. I wondered just when it had been put into Manon's bed. And what sort of a bag it was. Somehow I'd got the impression from Mellor that it was one of those large bags that are always stuffed to overflowing with letters and papers, powder and make-up—all that. And if so, surely one would notice if it had been pushed into one's bed. That was a point I thought I might take up with Ambrose later.

And then what he said about the Palfers worried me. After all, Emmie and Rannie were both highly reputable people, even if I didn't much like Emmie's personality; but it was hardly likely that anything could happen to me in their house. Not—I decided—that I was in the least likely to be invited there. I hadn't had the impression at the Billhook that I was much of a success with either of the Palfers, and possibly that prejudiced me. Pure vanity. Still, usually people quite like me, and it's always rather bad for morale to feel that people don't. One should be above that petty-mindedness, I suppose, but I'm not.

I thought back idly over that rather failure of a party at the Billhook. Gull had been there first, then Ambrose and I had arrived, and Gull had been very pleasant, but obviously wished we had been Gilda. Then Emmie and Rannie had turned up about nine o'clock and had equally obviously been disappointed not to find Gilda, and I remembered that I had wondered rather cattishly just why they should have been so keen on Gilda—what I mean is—Gilda is not really such great shakes. However . . .

There really hadn't been anything to put me off Emmie—it was just a natural antipathy, I suppose. She was so con-

sciously all that a woman should be—being brilliantly clever and having a career, but also so lushly feminine. Phoo . . .

I began to think about Gull and try and work out whether any girl could seriously prefer Julian to him. It didn't seem reasonable. Gull was attractive and sufficiently difficult not to be dull, and really Julian was simply not grown up at all. But really not.

It seemed to me that everything was really piled up against Julian. Everything that was known of him was so frightfully unsatisfactory, and his story of losing the key, and then going along to Gilda's flat because he was afraid Theo might have found it just didn't make any sense at all. I wished we had Hollow to deal with instead of Mellor. Hollow had been awfully decent and co-operative down at Grogan's place. I'd have felt able to tell him just exactly the small things that fussed me over all this.

It was nearly half-past six now, and the evenings were getting longer so that the room was full of early dusk, and a grey depressing light. It was the sort of light that is not in the least helped by turning on the electric lights, and one always feels guilty about pulling the curtains when it's still daylight and the government has been so kind about Daylight Saving. Still, when one's feeling rather jumpy, it's quite the worst sort of light to have.

The telephone rang and I made myself go quite calmly to answer it. It would simply be The Parent telephoning to say he was dining at the club, I assured myself, and lifted the receiver and said casually—"Hullo? Kensington 04573."

It wasn't The Parent. It was a girl's voice, high-pitched and nervous.

"Hullo," she said, "I just wanted to tell you that if you want to collect your boy friend Edward, you'd better get some strong chaps and go down to Abel Alley p-q-d."

She rang off.

I wasn't going to bother Ambrose with this. He'd do something crazy like getting up. I rang through to Mellor and luckily got him. I told him what had happened, and he said, "Thanks Miss Brown. . . . We'll get right down there. You stay where you are."

"If you find him," I said quickly. "Bring him back here."

I rather thought I heard him say something about "If he's not a hospital case!" before he rang off.

For no good reason at all I banged down the receiver and rushed and turned on all the lights in the hall, and found my heart beating in the most sickening way. Then the bell from Ambrose's room began to ring violently and I went upstairs to see what he wanted.

"Who was on the telephone?" he snapped at me the instant I got into the room.

"I wish I knew," I said. "Oh, Ambrose . . . it's frightful."
- I flung myself into the chair by his side, grabbed his hand and told him about it.

He beamed at me affectionately and patted my head.

"For the first time in your life, my poppet," he said kindly, "you've actually used your brains."

Chapter Eleven

EDWARD was not a hospital case, and he was escorted back to the house by Mellor and the inevitable Pennell, and the inevitable police car sat outside the house to the intense interest of the neighbours, and to what would be the intense fury of The Parent if he knew about it.

Hospital case or not, Edward was in a ghastly mess. He had two black eyes, and two teeth missing, a cut on his forehead and, as he gloomily remarked, bruises all over.

He'd refused to go and be given first-aid before coming to see me and Ambrose, so, as it happened, the district nurse's first job (she turned up three minutes after Edward and the police, and plainly thought it was all most exhilarating) was to fix Edward, and then we had to wait while she fixed Ambrose before Edward would tell what had happened. He was determined to tell it to Ambrose before he told Mellor.

Mellor appeared not at all disgruntled about this, and merely sat and twirled his hat, while he stared at Edward with mild interest in his large ox eyes. At last, however, the nurse went off and we all went up to Ambrose's room, and Edward told what had happened.

It was quite simple. He had gone round to the Captain's place in the morning about noon and found the Bandar-log all scurrying round and adding up their drinking money, chattering and nattering about Julian and poor Manon. They had seemed quite friendly, and there was a lot of coming and going, but as he realised later they kept him talking on one pretext or another, and then Brink came in. Brink wasn't at all friendly, but he remained morose and unpleasant, and did nothing aggressive. Edward said he got the idea now that they must have sent a message to someone to say he was there. At any rate, when he said he was moving along about one o'clock, having heard nothing of interest, somehow or other they picked a quarrel. Brink started it, he said, though Brink

did not take part in the free-for-all that took place. Edward was rather confused as to how the row started, but he gathered he was intended to be bashed and when it started there was no doubt at all that they all went for him, though to an outsider it might have seemed a general mêlée. He was knocked right out, he said, and when he came to he was lying on a bed in one of the numerous little rooms at the top of the house. He was pretty shaky, he said, and just as he started to get to his feet, the Captain came in and started to tear a strip off him for making a row. . . . While that was going on a young man called Berry came in with a glass of brandy and water, and told the Captain to lay off. . . . Gaunt wasn't to blame, said this young man, it was all of them, and Gaunt had had a bad doing, and had better have a brandy and get cleaned up. The Captain went off grumbling, and Edward drank the brandy, which must have had knock-out drops in it, because he passed straight out and didn't wake up until about half-past six; then he felt so dopey and rotten that he didn't get moving for about another five minutes; then he found the door was locked, and that sent him into a blind fury. He began to bang on it and shout. Nobody took any notice, and he realised that he was at the top of the house, and if they didn't want to let him out, it was fifty to one that anyone outside the house would hear. But he was so blind mad that he went on banging and shouting, and then to his amazement the door was opened and there were the police. . . .

"Yes," said Mellor with grim satisfaction, "it was a good thing you were kicking up that noise. I hadn't got a search warrant, and that Captain chap wasn't going to let me in. But when we heard you, he hadn't any choice."

He looked at Ambrose thoughtfully.

"What was the idea, do you think?" he asked.

"You've got your own idea, haven't you?" said Ambrose. Mellor nodded.

"Still, I'd like to hear yours," he said.

"Well, I should say they had their instructions from someone . . . just to start a rough-house. I should guess that tonight, Gaunt would have been quietly removed to some quiet spot. And kept out of the way. He's alarmed someone. . . ."

Mellor grunted.

"You're not trying to tell me there's a 'master-mind' behind all those little cheapjacks, are you?" he said. "It sounds much too dangerous for them."

He suddenly lost his sleepy, ox-eyed look and snapped at Edward.

"Do you know anything that could make you dangerous to anyone?" he said.

"Not consciously," said Edward. "But I have a lot of oddments all mixed up in my mind, and probably one or two of them are significant, if I could only match them up."

Mellor looked round at us all and became velvety again.

"You're not all of you trying to make out that Julian Cleghorn is innocent, are you?" he purred.

"I am," said Ambrose casually, and gave him a sweet and innocent smile.

Mellor twirled his hat thoughtfully.

"I'm always willing to be told I'm wrong," he observed in his most creamy tones. "Suppose you put me right, Mr. Merriman."

"Suppose you ask Cleghorn how he got into the flat when he found Theo Nineveh dead," said Ambrose kindly.

"I did," said Mellor, with the air of one making a great concession. "He said he found it open."

"Highly improbable," said Ambrose placidly. "The chap who did this murder was not the type who lost his head and rushed out leaving a door open so that anyone could walk in and find the corpse."

"Go on," said Mellor with heavy patience.

"You didn't find the key on Cleghorn, did you?" asked Ambrose.

"He could have thrown it away," said Mellor stolidly.

"He could have," said Ambrose. "But there's another thing, you know. If he was rushing madly down the stairs as your witness says—'looking demented' was, I believe, the exact description—then I don't believe he would have taken the clock and the money with him—much less the handbag. And whoever planted that handbag in Manon's blankets could not have been Cleghorn, because he was locked up. . . ."

"The only objection to that," said Edward unexpectedly—

and most traitorously—"is that the girl Manon is quite capable of not making her bed for a week . . . so the bag could have been there from the night of the murder."

"Thank you," said Ambrose, with a dangerous meekness.

"I was only looking all round the subject," said Edward hastily.

"All right, then," said Ambrose, still with unnatural meekness, "let us suppose that Cleghorn murdered Theo in a state of dementia, took the clock, searched for money, took the bag, concealed them about his person and then rushed frenziedly away. He then puts the clock and money in his room, which hasn't got a lock, and is in a house inhabited by jackdaws, takes the bag and makes his way to the Manon habitation and freakishly hides the bag among her blankets. Don't be absurd!"

"The Bandar-log theory," remarked Mellor blandly.

"Quite," said Ambrose. "But it's also possible that someone with intelligence is using the Bandar-log technique for a purpose. I do suggest, Mellor, if you'll not be deeply offended——"

"I like suggestions," interposed Mellor politely.

"Well—I suggest you begin to check seriously on Manon's movements on the night of the murder . . . even being so indelicate as to discover whether she slept alone, and the following nights. . . . I rather think it would be useless to enquire among the male Bandar-log, but the females of the species might be helpful. I don't think she's a popular girl. . . . And apropos of the females. . . . I wonder who it was that telephoned Delia about Gaunt's predicament. . . ."

"I rather think I know," said Edward. "But . . ."

"You don't want her given away?" suggested Ambrose.

"That's all right," said Mellor reassuringly. "Nothing was given away. So far as that monkey-house is concerned, we were merely calling to make further enquiries when we heard Mr. Gaunt kicking up that din."

He looked at Ambrose doubtfully.

"Now listen," he said, and he sounded almost plaintive. "It's all fairly feasible that Cleghorn or one of them might have strangled this woman in a fit of temper or hysteria, but I can't see this master-mind behind the scenes. Not in

that galère. You're not suggesting that they are organised for murder, or that they'd have gone so far as to kidnap Mr. Gaunt . . . and . . . well, take him for a ride?"

"If you really want to know," said Ambrose grimly, "I am suggesting that the real murderer would go pretty far to avoid being hanged. I also suggest that he's got brains and, moreover, that this murder is not in the least motiveless. I think he saw his chance and took it . . . but all the rest of his actions have been very well organised and planned. . . . And he doesn't want anyone being inquisitive."

There was a long silence.

"But why the devil should the Abel Alley lot do his dirty work for him?" said Mellor irritably. "If he exists?"

"I should think he's a character with some money," said Ambrose. "He might be a receiver in a small way . . . and he's got enough on them for them to do what they're told. They probably haven't a clue as to the reasons for his instructions. . . ."

"The only type I can think of who in any way fits that description," said Edward dubiously, "is Nineveh himself. He's by way of being a tin god to them . . . he lends them money sometimes . . . and I've heard rumours that he buys some of their petty ill-gotten gains."

"Nineveh," said Mellor with his most velvety assurance, "has a cast-iron alibi. No getting round it."

But he wasn't looking happy for all that.

Ambrose smiled at him kindly.

"You may have to let Julian out of jug," he said pleasantly, "but to tell you the truth, I'm just as pleased you pulled him in. He's safer with you than outside in this wicked world. If he'd been free to make an idiot of himself, and with Gina to aid and abet him, I'd bet quite a lot of money he'd have hanged himself—metaphorically speaking."

"I'm not convinced," said Mellor stiffly and stood up. "This idea of petty blackmail. . . ."

"Little fleas have bigger fleas on their backs to bite 'em," said Ambrose. "And big fleas have bigger fleas and so on *ad infinitum*."

He smiled seraphically at the darkling Mellor.

"And the blackmailing isn't all petty," he added.

"I'll follow your suggestions," said Mellor, still more stiffly; "and if anything comes of it, I'll let you know."

"Thank you," said Ambrose sincerely.

"We can drop you if you like, Mr. Gaunt," said Mellor amiably.

"He's staying here," said Ambrose firmly.

I began to feel rather dizzy. I had to consider just what The Parent's reactions would be to this invasion . . . and still more, what the daily's would be. She'd leave, I thought despairingly, and Lise wasn't due back for a fortnight. Maybe it was paltry to consider such things in circumstances like these, but they do come into one's mind.

"Oh no . . ." began Edward, with proper consideration.

"I couldn't possibly . . ."

At that moment we heard a taxi draw up in front of the house, and the sound of The Parent's voice giving instructions to somebody. The front door opened and, after a few seconds, was slammed shut and the sound of martial footsteps coming up the stairs could be heard. Then the bedroom door was flung open and The Parent stood there and surveyed the company with choleric amazement, while his face became alarmingly scarlet.

"Good evening, sir," said Ambrose cheerfully. "May I introduce Inspector Mellor and Sergeant Pennell. The casualty over there is Edward Gaunt."

"I've met Gaunt," said my father in a stifled voice. "What on earth is going on? Is everybody mad?"

He re-collected himself, because he's really very nice in spite of his prejudices, and said good evening to Mellor and Pennell.

From behind him a cheerful, familiar voice said, "Good gracious, Miss Delia . . . whatever has been happening?"

I gave a cry of pure joy.

"Nanny, darling!" I exclaimed and rushed at her and embraced her. "It'll be all right now."

"What will be?" asked The Parent suspiciously.

"Ambrose thinks that Edward ought to stay here," I explained. "He thinks they might try and murder him, too, or something. . . ."

"That's all right," said The Parent bitterly. "Turn the place into a hospital ward. Don't mind me."

He looked at Mellor and Pennell.

"Too many people in this room," he announced. "You'd better come down with me and have some whisky. We'll leave the women to look after the casualties. Just as well I thought of getting hold of you, Nanny. Carry on."

He marched out of the room again, followed by the police. Nanny looked at Ambrose and then at Edward.

"The poor lambs," she said. "It's a wicked shame. How are you, Mr. Ambrose. I never thought to find you fighting. . . ."

"It was no fight," said Ambrose gloomily. "It was a massacre. I'm a much more serious case than Mr. Gaunt, Nanny, so you can spoil me. . . ."

Nanny looked at Edward and shook her head.

"He looks terrible, poor young man," she said. "Just wait a few minutes and I'll put him to bed. I'll make some nice hot milk for both of you."

"Oh, Nanny," I said and to my eternal shame burst into tears, just because I was so glad to see her. She made such sense and gave everything such a nice safe feeling.

Chapter Twelve

NANNIE is an extraordinary old lady. She took the news that a murder had been committed without blinking, and as she knew both Julian and Gilda, she adopted the attitude that it was just like them both to get themselves into trouble. They always had done—and they always would. But she was quite calmly certain that Julian hadn't done it.

"Mr. Ambrose will get them out of it," she said. "He always did in the old days."

Now I come to think of it, it's true that whenever Julian and Gilda came to stay with us, they got themselves into tiresome troubles with the neighbouring farmers, and that Ambrose, if ever he happened to be around, always did get them out of it; but it was rather a different thing from Theo. Nineveh it seemed to me.

As for Ambrose, he got out of bed the next morning and came downstairs in a dressing-gown and settled himself next to the telephone extension in the morning-room. From there he rang the *Morning Crier* and got on to Gull. Edward and I were both in the room with him, and it seemed to me from what I heard of the conversation that Gull was not being particularly friendly, and Edward seemed to get the same idea, because he looked at me and raised his eyebrows in an exaggerated way.

However, Ambrose, is a frightfully difficult person to daunt, and by the end of the conversation Gull had agreed to come round and see him during the morning.

"Gilda's been playing on his sympathy," Ambrose said when he put down the receiver. "It seems she doesn't want me told anything at all about Julian—or what he's said to Pride. Silly little idiot. I'll have to go round and talk sense to her."

Edward had been sitting and gazing into the small garden,

where the sun shone fitfully, but he turned round abruptly and looked at Ambrose.

"The Palfers are working on her," he said.

"Now why should they?" asked Ambrose mildly.

"I don't know," said Edward. "How well do you know them?"

"Not well at all," Ambrose told him. "They're friends of Gilda's really. That's why they asked Delia and me to go to the Billhook that night. They seemed worried about her. . . . Emmie wanted me to talk to Gull about it . . . I spent quite a time that evening explaining to Emmie that it was really no business of mine."

"It doesn't make sense," I blurted out.

Ambrose regarded me with interest.

"What doesn't?" he asked.

"The Palfers bothering about Gilda," I said. "They're both much too selfish to bother about anyone or anything. . . . And Emmie is much too sensible to really think you could discuss such a thing with Gull."

"Yes—that's an interesting angle," said Ambrose thoughtfully.

I was aware that I was beaming fatuously. I always do get the most absurd satisfaction when Ambrose approves of anything I say.

"What really puzzles me," said Edward, "is why someone is taking so much trouble to stop either you or I taking an interest in Julian's welfare. After all, it's obvious that it must make the police begin to wonder a bit . . . which is presumably just what whoever it is doesn't want."

"I've been thinking," said Ambrose slowly. "Whoever it was slugged me did it off his own bat. I do remember vaguely what happened. I'm not saying anything to Mellor yet, because it is very vague. I have the strongest impression that as I saw Manon get into the taxi, someone else hurried out and got in after her. Then whoever it was slugged me and all was a beautiful blank."

"Brink swears Manon went off alone in the taxi," Edward pointed out.

"Brink has had a screw loose ever since that motor smash," said Ambrose. "Also he's been in love with Manon for a long

time, poor fellow. I'll be interested to know just what explanation he'll cook up about the Nineveh bag. I rather think that business will stir him into some strange activity. As for the handbag, I've a peculiar idea about that. I want that Manon girl out on bail. . . . I want to talk to her."

"I'll go bail for her," said Edward obligingly. "I'm a householder and all that."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Ambrose lazily. "You're staying in this house and not moving out of it. You can amuse yourself jotting down very accurately everything that you've said and done in the last four days, and everything that was said and done to you. So far as the outside world is concerned you've vanished. I am the one who is going out into the big city. . . ."

"You're not fit enough," I protested.

He smiled at me in a kindly, maddening way.

"Listen, poppet," he said. "Julian is for the high jump unless I can dig something really solid up. I've shaken Mellor's confidence, but not enough."

"We ought to be able to prove he didn't take her to the flat," I pointed out.

"He *did* take her to the flat," Edward interrupted. "I know that. I was there when the argument took place, but I wasn't very interested. In fact, I was bored with the whole place and had decided to go home and just as I was leaving Julian and Theo brushed past me and took a taxi. I heard Julian give Gilda's address."

Ambrose cocked a very doubtful eyebrow at him.

"But you didn't tell the police this?" he asked.

"They didn't ask me," said Edward.

"What time was this?" said Ambrose.

"Round about nine," Edward told him.

"Didn't anyone else notice them?" Ambrose asked curiously.

Edward shrugged. His nice-looking face became bored.

"I gather two other people noticed them and have made statements to that effect to the police," he said.

"Sure it was nine o'clock?" insisted Ambrose.

"Round or about," said Edward.

"Times," said Ambrose, "are rather important I think."

"Obviously," said Edward.

Ambrose sighed.

"You might pack your brains and make a list of everyone you can remember being in the club that night, around that time," he said to Edward. "Everyone you can remember. I think it might be interesting."

A rather beastly idea came to me. It was all very well Edward saying he was trying to clear Julian, and then telling Ambrose the one thing that was absolutely damning. And if he'd known that all the time why hadn't he told me? Because, after all one has to know all the points against as well as the points for. . . . There were awfully few points *for* Julian, and this that Edward had just said was formidable. I wished that Ambrose would let Edward go away to his flat or wherever it was he lived. It looked as if I'd never have a chance to talk to Ambrose alone . . . and I badly wanted to talk to him.

However, there it was, and Gull would be arriving soon. I wondered whether Ambrose was going to let Edward sit in on his conference with Gull. It seemed stupid to me really. After all, Gull didn't know Edward, and ~~no one~~ would be likely to talk really frankly with him sitting there. But there was usually some good reason for Ambrose's most irritating actions, and anyway there was nothing I could do about it. I decided I'd go out and do the shopping. Nanny would be quite certain to want all kinds of things if she was going to feed three men.

I slid quietly away. To tell the truth I didn't want to tell Ambrose I was going out. In his present mood he might quite easily object to it, but although everything was quite horrible, I somehow didn't think anyone was likely to abduct me or anything dramatic like that. Besides I had an idea that I might go down to the Palfers' and try and talk sense to Gilda. She was an awful idiot, and I didn't like her very much, but I was sorry for her . . . and I did feel I wanted to put her right about Ambrose. After all, Mellor had said quite definitely that Ambrose had tried to stop him grabbing Julian like that.

I took Ambrose's car. He wouldn't want it, and besides he certainly oughtn't to go round driving cars after getting concussion, so it was a good thing to deprive him of any opportunity. Nannie had made out one of those lengthy lists that comprised all kinds of things that never occurred to me when

I was doing the housekeeping. She appeared to think that the household was deficient in almost everything a self-respecting housekeeper should have. So I just dropped the list into the grocers, told them to send it and drove on down to the Palfers'.

I rather hoped that Emmie had decided that Gilda could be left on her own for a little and had gone back to her lecturing or whatever she did. It would be much easier to make sense with Gilda without Emmie's competent and superior presence.

Just as I pulled up in front of the Palfers' house, I saw someone else at the front door, and realised rather worriedly that it was Brink. I remembered what Ambrose had said about Brink being spurred on into all kinds of activities and guessed that this was one them. I somehow couldn't see Brink as a bosom friend of the Palfers.

Just for a moment I thought of leaving it and driving away, and then I thought that it was a cowardly thing to do; after all, it was pure chance that had brought me here just at this moment, and I might as well see if I could find out anything. I switched off the engine and marched up to the front door and arrived just as it was opened by Gilda herself.

She had obviously expected Brink, which seemed queer to me; but when she saw me she looked absolutely flabbergasted.

"I can't see you . . ." she began.

But Brink interrupted her in a brusque authoritative way.

"She might just as well hear what I'm going to say," he said. "It's not particularly private."

"Oh, very well," said Gilda sulkily. "But she's in with the police."

"Why shouldn't she be?" asked Brink in an unpleasant jibing sort of way. "You need someone who's in with the police if you want to get Julian Cleghorn out of his present predicament."

"I suppose," I said, "you would like to get Manon out of her present predicament."

He stared at me for a moment and then gave a swift, almost likeable smile.

"I would," he said. "Do you think you can help me?"

"Ambrose could," I said rashly.

After all, just because Ambrose had said he would like

Manon out on bail, didn't mean that he was prepared to join in with Brink's peculiar activities.

"Could he?" said Brink thoughtfully. "Then I think he and I might get together. Does he know who hit him yet?"

"No," I said. "Do you?"

"I do not," said Brink, "but I know who didn't. I could weed out a few suspects for him. It wasn't Paul Nineveh—for one."

"Did someone hit Ambrose?" enquired Gilda, with what I could only consider satisfaction.

"They did," I told her coldly.

"Oh, you'd better both come in," she said suddenly. "We can't talk on the doorstep."

Emmie's house was exactly what one would expect. It was modern, comfortable, full of gadgets and the inevitable mobiles, and with paintings of females with only one eye and that sort of thing on the walls. In it Brink looked supremely and wretchedly shabby and down at heel, while Gilda looked vaguely untidy and out of place.

"Sit down, both of you," she said, when she had ushered us into a small, square room where a square settee and square chairs stood squarely on a thick beige carpet.

She collapsed awkwardly into a chair herself and stared at us miserably.

"Well?" she said.

"Haven't you got a drink of some sort?" asked Brink aggressively; "Scotch for choice."

Gilda got up and wandered over to a corner cupboard, from which she produced a decanter and two glasses. I supposed it was Rannie's whisky, and wondered just how he would appreciate it being handed out like this.

"I don't want one," I said hurriedly.

Brink looked acidly amused, and poured himself out about four fingers into a tumbler, and just squirted soda into it.

"Well," he said at last, "what I say here is off the record, and if either of you repeat it to the police, I shall simply deny having said it. I have my own reasons for saying it and sympathy for Cleghorn isn't one of them. I don't particularly want the man who killed Theo Nineveh to get off; on the other hand, I am not yet prepared to take any definite steps

to help get him. It all depends on who it was that took the trouble to put Theo Nineveh's bag in Manon's room."

He swallowed his whisky and stared out of the window. His worn face looked whiter than ever and there was an odd, haunted look in his eyes.

"Whoever tried to pull that poor kid, Manon, into this needs hanging," he said at length.

"Ambrose thinks that," I told him.

It wasn't really precisely what Ambrose had said, but I had an idea that he did think it.

Brink turned his eyes from the window with an effort and looked at me.

"I can prove," he said, "that Julian did not go up into Gilda's flat with Theo. I heard them arrange to go there, and I went after them. I had a reason for that. I wanted a few words with Theo myself. A few quiet private words where we would be undisturbed. Which was something she didn't want at all. They stopped the taxi about twenty yards from the block and walked the rest of the way. I followed. They went up in the lift and I went up the stairs. I must have got there only a minute after them. I'm pretty quick at stairs. What I meant to do was to knock at the door, and then insist on having a talk with Theo. I was sure I could make Julian see reason about that. But just as I got to that floor I saw Julian let Theo into the flat, say he'd give her an hour, and then go back to the lift and away. I waited till I heard the lift gates open and shut at the ground floor, then I tapped on the door and Theo opened it. She was wild . . . but she had to let me in. She said she was expecting someone, so we got our chat over quickly, and not very satisfactorily, but never mind that. I went off and left her there. Don't be under any delusions. She was alive when I left."

"I can see," I murmured, "why you didn't want to rush to the police with this story."

He gave a painful sort of grin.

"Quite," he said.

Gilda said in a choked voice:

"But you must tell them . . . you must . . . I'll tell them if you don't."

He merely looked contemptuous.

"I should deny it absolutely," he told her.

"Delia has heard you," she insisted huskily.

"Oh yes, Delia has heard me," he said. "So what? I shall still deny it; I shall say you both got together to help Cleghorn . . . and I was nowhere near the Captain's either that night or the following day to plant the clock and the money. . . . No. . . . I'll come forward at my own time. Or I'll say I offered to alibi Cleghorn for money. It doesn't matter to me what people think. . . ."

He relapsed again into his sightless look.

I pulled myself together. It would be a good thing to give him another drink, I thought, and I said so politely.

Brink gave me his macabre, humourless grin.

"One can tell you come from a naval family," he said.

"Well, what happened after that?" I asked him. "Didn't you want to know who she was expecting?"

He shrugged.

"Why should I be interested in her sordid affairs?" he asked savagely. "No—I went away. ~~If you want to know~~, I thought Cleghorn had sunk just about as low as he could, allowing her to use Gilda's flat for her assignations. I wish now I had waited. . . ."

Gilda looked at him for a moment and then tears sprang out of her eyes.

"Never mind what you think about Julian," she said. "He didn't do it. . . . You must know that . . . you must tell the truth now."

"Listen," he said and he sounded tired and bitter and unmoved. "I came here to tell you this, because I know how you must feel. I know just what it feels like to be accused of something you never did. But I'm not going to put my head in the noose for nothing. And I'd have a charming time trying to prove I hadn't killed her, wouldn't I? No. I can only promise you this . . . that if the worst comes to the worst, and Merriman and company between them haven't managed to get him out of it, then I'll tell my story. You can tell Cleghorn if you like . . . at least you can tell him that he'll be all right. But if you rush me . . . I'll deny the whole thing. . . ."

It was obvious that what Ambrose said was true. Brink

was screwy. The whole thing was screwy, but I was half-inclined to believe that he had told Gilda all this to try and relieve her mind.

"Look here," I said, "I shall obviously tell Ambrose all this."

"I daresay you will," he said indifferently. "I might tell him myself, if I could trust him. What I want to know is just how that bag got into Manon's bed."

"I can't see any point in it being put there," I told him, "unless it's part of the Bandar-log theory."

"What's that?" he asked and held out his glass for a third whisky.

I explained it to him briefly, while Gilda in a hypnotised way refilled his glass.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "Well, there's a lot in that. All that nonsense about Edward Gaunt. . . ."

"It wasn't nonsense," I said indignantly. "He was very badly beaten up."

"Yes, I know," said Brink indifferently. "He's not popular. But they only shoved him out of the way upstairs with some idiotic idea of keeping him out of sight until the black eyes had faded. Just in case he went to the police. . . . The Captain's rather sensitive about too much interest on the part of the police."

"Well, it was funny after Ambrose had been slugged," I persisted.

"Don't worry," said Brink. "The two things are quite separate. Someone really meant business with Ambrose. The row with Gaunt was his own fault, really, and there was a slight attack of mass hysteria going on."

He stood up.

"Well, I'll be going now," he said.

Gilda looked at me rather frantically, but I didn't see what I could do. It was quite obvious that he had said all he meant to say and I wasn't quite sure in my own mind whether he hadn't imagined the whole story.

"Good-bye," he said and walked out of the room and out of the house.

"Well, that was odd," I said ineptly.

Gilda caught hold of my arm in an urgent, desperate way.

"I'm sorry, Delia," she said. "I'm sorry about what I said the other day. I'm going crazy with anxiety. Delia . . . do you think I could see Ambrose . . . could I come and see him now?"

"Come on," I said cheerfully. "Of course you can. We'll be more than somewhat interested in Brink."

Chapter Thirteen

ONE thing I was absolutely resolute about, and that was I would tell Ambrose privately about what Brink had said. I wanted to tell him particularly Brink's idea about what had really happened to Edward. It seemed to me to be quite possible; because although I liked Edward awfully, I did see that sometimes he was rather maddening and superior. And I wondered whether he'd been like that at the Captain's, and they had really gone berserk out of sheer nerves. Specially if they didn't like him.

Also I wondered whether Gull would be there when we got back.

Gilda was sitting rather huddled up beside me in the car and I was suddenly fond of her and really sorry again.

"Gilda," I said, "Inspector Mellor said that Ambrose really did try and stop him."

"I expect Ambrose did," said Gilda. "Only it was such a shock, and then Gull was furious with me about thinking of going back to my house . . . and I don't know . . . I haven't seen Julian, you know. He simply refuses to see me. He thinks I—I talked to Ambrose . . . and he blames Ambrose for it all. So you see . . ."

"Well, Julian's an ass," I said firmly. "But then, he always was."

"I suppose he was," said Gilda in a funny voice, as if that view of Julian had only occurred to her for the first time.

"Always," I said, still more firmly.

I suddenly realised that up to now Gilda had always seen Julian twice as large as life . . . and dramatised him madly. I mean, when he ought to have been snubbed or ignored she had fallen down and accepted his pose of the moment. Well, I thought unkindly, no one in Brixton will fall for any of his poses and it may do him good.

After a few minutes Gilda seemed to pull herself together and get less huddled.

"You know," she said, "I didn't put the clock and money in Julian's room. You must believe that."

"Well, of course I believe it, dope," I said.

To my surprise she produced a weak giggle.

"That's the first time for three days anyone has spoken naturally," she remarked. "Emmie and Rannie are appallingly tactful all the time. And what makes it worse is that they obviously believe Julian did it."

"How peculiar of them," I said.

Gilda considered that in silence.

"It *is* peculiar," she said at last, "because Gull has told them that he doesn't believe it himself, and what's more that Mr. Pride doesn't either. And Pride is absolutely cynical, Gull says, and would not be in the least shocked or worried even if he thought Julian was guilty, but he doesn't. So I do think it's peculiar that Emmie and Rannie should be so certain Julian did it. . . ."

"Do they say so?" I asked with interest.

"Emmie did once," said Gilda slowly. "She came to my bedroom two nights ago, and had a heart to heart talk in which she said very sadly, but kindly, that I must really face the possibility that it was Julian . . . and went on into a long lecture on psychology. I almost began to believe her."

"It's just what she would do," I told her crossly. "It's just the sort of kind, unctuous thing she would do—and being awfully understanding all the time."

"I know," said Gilda in a forlorn way. "I begin to feel like that when she talks to me . . . but I'm stuck there now."

She sounded as if she hoped I'd say, "Oh, come back to us." But really how could I? The house was full to bursting point.

"Anyway," I said briskly, "we can at least tell Ambrose all about Brink's very peculiar story."

"We can do that," said Gilda, and paused while I negotiated a rather nasty crossing. "By the way, there's something I ought to tell you. When he telephoned and said he was coming and he had something to tell me, he made me promise on my word of honour not to tell either of the Palfers. I promised, so they mustn't be told."

"How funny," I observed. "*Only* the Palfers."

"Only the Palfers," Gilda assured me.

"Curiouser and curiouser," I said, and accelerated down a quietish road. I was simply longing to get back and tell Ambrose all about it.

Gull was still there when we got back. It seemed that Nanny thought nothing of producing lunch for any number even without any notice. When he saw Gilda he gave a quite enchanting smile and said, "Well, at last you're being nice and sensible, darling."

He said 'darling' quite naturally, and it seemed to me that Gilda found it perfectly normal.

"I've explained to Delia," she said simply.

"You needn't bother to explain to me," said Ambrose pleasantly. "What a dope you can be, Gilda."

He held out his left hand to her, and she took it and then bent down impulsively and kissed him.

"I do really ~~like you~~ like you so much, Ambrose," she said. "And I'm awfully sorry someone did that to you."

"So am I," said Ambrose ruefully. "You didn't hire an assassin by any chance, did you? Out of wicked revenge for imagined injuries."

"Ambrose!" she exclaimed indignantly.

He laughed.

"It's all right," he said. "I didn't really suspect you."

"Where's Edward?" I asked suddenly.

"He's all right," said Ambrose negligently. "Friend Mellor called to enquire after our health this morning, and Edward went off with him to identify a few Bandar-log who were engaged in yesterday's squabble. I don't see much point in it really, but Edward seems annoyed about the whole thing and is out for blood."

I supposed really that if Edward pointed them out, then Mellor could ask them a lot of questions, but if what Brink said was true, then there wouldn't be much to be gained.

I rather thought I'd better leave it to Gilda to start the story of Brink. And then I remembered her word of honour not to tell the Palfers. Privately, I did not think it would be easy to keep anything from Emmie Palfer, and the amount of whisky

Brink had drunk was bound to be noticed by Rannie, who couldn't possibly be expected to believe that Gilda had drunk all that. But I knew Gilda to the extent that she held strongly to her word of honour, and I wondered just what she would do. Of course, I hadn't made any promises, and I was determined to tell Ambrose the moment I got a chance. But I didn't think it was fair to tell Gull unless Gilda wanted to, so I just waited.

However she had evidently great faith in both Gull and Ambrose.

"I've something to tell you," she said, "and I gave my word of honour that the Palfers should not know about it. I'd like you both to promise me that neither of the Palfers will hear it from you."

Gull looked bothered.

"Is it anything to do with either of them?" he asked.

"Nothing at all," Gilda assured him.

She seemed to have come alive again, and to be the sort of girl you could imagine making good advertising business, which had never seemed to me to be the case before.

"Well then, I'll promise," said Gull.

"What about the police, Gilda?" said Ambrose.

"Nor the police—yet," said Gilda quickly. "You'll understand why when I tell you."

Ambrose seemed doubtful, but she went on steadily.

"I may as well tell you that Delia knows. She heard it first hand, and she made no promise . . . so, of course, if she chooses to, she can tell you, but . . ."

"I think you can promise, Ambrose," I said. "I think as a matter of fact, Brink will come and tell you himself fairly soon. But till then . . . do promise."

"I'm not making a promise of that kind," said Ambrose. "Gilda, will you trust me sufficiently if I say I will not tell the police unless I know that it is essential they should be told?"

She seemed to have swung completely round, because she only paused a split second before she answered.

"All right, Ambrose," she said. "I'll take that."

"In that case," said Ambrose, "I think we might all have a pre-lunch sherry, and Gilda can tell us all about it."

Gilda really told it beautifully. Almost word for word, and

with the emphasis exactly where Brink had put it. Ambrose listened without any apparent emotion, but Gull frowned heavily, except when Gilda told what Brink had said about Edward and the roughhouse, and then he suddenly chuckled.

"You know, I shouldn't be at all surprised if Brink isn't right about that," he told Ambrose. "Young Gaunt's all right, but he is inclined to be a bit tiresomely superior. . . ."

Ambrose said unexpectedly, "You know, I think it's extremely important to find out who put that bag in Manon's bed before Brink does."

Both Gilda and I stared at him in amazement, but he didn't appear to notice. He was screwing up his eyes the way he does when he is on the verge of something important.

"I wouldn't put it past that one to have pinched it quite simply," said Gull.

"In that case when did she pinch it?" demanded Ambrose. "My recollection of Theo Nineveh is that she clutched that bag of hers as if it contained the Crown Jewels. Unless, of course, she pinched it from the murderer, but that doesn't make much sense, and it's obvious that Brink doesn't think that. It's obvious that Brink considers it was pushed on to Manon for some unpleasant and vindictive reason. He may well be right. Manon was very careless about other women's men."

"My idea also," said Gull quietly, "is that there was something in that bag which the murderer wanted badly. He hadn't time to search it—or hadn't the nerve to while he was in the flat, so he took it away with him and searched it later. . . . I'm prepared to bet that whatever it was wasn't in the bag when it got into Manon's bed."

I began to giggle feebly and outrageously, but somehow or other Manon's bed seemed to be becoming important out of all proportion . . . and I had a weak vision of Theo's bag getting into Manon's bed of its own accord.

Something of the same sort must have struck Gilda, because she began to giggle too, and that was too much; neither of us could stop. It was awful, because there was really no justification whatsoever for finding anything funny in the affair.

Then Ambrose came out with another seemingly irrelevant remark.

"If Brink's right about Gaunt," he said, "then the lad can quite safely go back to his own place and Gilda can come here."

Gull looked doubtful.

"That's a bit rude to the Palfers, don't you think?" he asked.

"It's natural for Gilda to be with her cousin and her old friends," said Ambrose. "How about it, Gilda?"

"I'd much rather come here," she said apologetically, "though I'm afraid Emmie may think it's a bit odd. I mean . . ." she blushed suddenly, "I did say an awful lot of frightful things about Ambrose to her, so it will look as if I'm unspeakably vacillating. . . ."

"Emmie's a nice woman," said Gull unhappily.

"And a sensible one," said Ambrose blithely. "I'll go and see her myself and explain how Gilda and I have had a beautiful reconciliation, and I can add all the trimmings. How I don't think Gilda ought to be left on her own all day, and how impossible it is to expect Emmie to neglect her important work to stay home with her."

"I've no doubt," said Gull ironically, "that you will do it beautifully."

"I would honestly prefer it, Gull darling," said Gilda.

He looked at her thoughtfully, and then gave that so unexpected and enchanting smile.

"All right, my dear, it's up to you," he said.

I got the distant idea at that moment that whatever happened to Julian, Gilda was not going to be there as a doormat for him in the future.

"And incidentally," said Ambrose casually, "I don't think young Mr. Gaunt need be told about Brink and his story."

Poor Edward, I thought sympathetically, he was plainly not awfully important in Ambrose's plans, and he would be allowed to fade gently out in the nicest possible way. I saw Ambrose regarding me with a kindly amusement and knew perfectly well that he understood exactly what I was thinking.

"Not to worry, poppet," he said. "We won't hurt his feelings. But seriously, this Brink saga must be strictly confidential. Just how tight was he, by the way?"

Gilda looked slightly agitated.

"He drank about half a bottle of Rannie's whisky," she said.

"Difficult," said Ambrose sadly. "I'm afraid, my poor cousin, that I shall have to traduce you. It's quite obvious that your nerves gave way so badly that you took to the bottle, and when Delia arrived she felt there was only one thing to do and that was to remove you from temptation and bring you round here. Not bad. It's an added reason for you staying here . . . otherwise Rannie's cellar would be drained dry."

"Oh, *really*," protested Gilda, but without any real conviction.

"Oh, well," said Gull resignedly, "if you've got to have it that way, Ambrose, I suppose you must. But I do feel that the Palfers are getting a raw deal after all their kindness."

"Be your age," said Ambrose quite tersely. "Do you want Gilda sitting round by herself in the Palfers' house with the everlasting chance of Brink getting drunker and more screwy than ever, and going visiting her?"

"No . . . you're perfectly right," said Gull. "By the way, what about Pride? Do we let him in on this story of Brink's?"

"Not right off," said Ambrose. "First thing is to find out about Manon. . . . Brink wants her out of gaol. Now there is where I think he's wrong. She's much safer where she is. It might really be worth someone's while to bump her off. She's the born murderess for one thing—and for another, I'm absolutely certain she's got a vital clue, though the poor dear hasn't the brains to know she's got it."

"I've often wondered," said Gull for no apparent reason, "who was in that car with Brink—and why he never said there was another person or persons and who they were."

"What on earth has that got to do with it?" asked Gilda.

"I'm wondering that," said Gull in a troubled voice. "I've been wondering for the last two days particularly."

Ambrose looked at him curiously.

"Haven't you any idea?" he asked.

I looked at him and saw that he looked tired and sad, much the way he'd looked at Grogan's when the American boy was found out, and quite suddenly I found I was feeling cold and my heart was thumping.

Gull shook his head.

"Have you?" he asked.

"I'm very much afraid I have," said Ambrose. "And it's not very nice."

Somehow no one asked him who he thought it was. It was queer and uncanny, as if all of us were afraid to know.

Chapter Fourteen

EDWARD was back in time for lunch and both Ambrose and Gull visibly melted. He looked much younger and very crest-fallen and was obviously deeply disillusioned. The Bandar-log, when hauled into the police station, had said exactly what Brink had said, and it had been only too plain that they were speaking the truth. The Captain had also been called upon, and it came out that he had not been privy to the locking up of Edward, but that that had been done to hide from the Captain just what had happened. It appeared that the Captain was very allergic to fights on his premises and was apt to show his displeasure in the most marked way. They had intended to let Edward loose later in the evening, when the Captain was out.

Mellor, however, had taken a poor view of the whole thing, and had persuaded Edward to charge them with assault. They were, Mellor had alleged, vicious little toads; so charged they were. Edward was really rather good about it all, because he did agree that he probably had been pompous and provocative, and he was obviously terribly disappointed not to have been the victim of a master-mind who feared him so much that he had to be got out of the way.

Ambrose remarked placidly that Edward was not to worry; no doubt he would be able to turn the whole thing to good account in a book, and that it was excellent that it had been cleared up. It was, said Ambrose, a typical Bandar-log effort and Edward must not feel too badly about it.

However, one thing did come out of it all. Mellor had told Edward casually that on the night of the murder Paul Nineveh had been with Manon in a coffee-house at about twelve o'clock, and Ambrose said something about unbreakable alibis being just the ones that were the most suspicious.

"And Nineveh's got enough money to buy himself one," said Gull thoughtfully.

Then he said he thought it would do Gilda good to have some fresh air, and as he had time to spare he would take her on the Serpentine. Gilda accepted this idea with every appearance of pleasure and they went off together. Edward said, with an engaging and wry grin, that as he didn't appear to be a menace to anyone, and therefore no one was likely to try and liquidate him, he might as well go to his own place and relieve the congestion in the Schloss Brown.

"Keep in touch," said Ambrose cheerfully, "and don't be too depressed because no one wants to murder you. And still keep your eyes and ears open."

"I'll do that," said Edward and went off.

Ambrose then tore a strip off me for going down to the Palfers'. No doubt, he said, it had turned out successful, but it might have been quite the reverse. And that he was now going up to bed for two hours, and then I could give him tea, and he hoped that Gull would have enough sense to keep Gilda out of tea, as he himself would not really mind having a little time alone with me.

"If Brink telephones," he added, "tell him I'll be delighted to see him any time, but I don't suppose he will. If he had all that whisky, he'd probably top it off with beer and go and sleep it off, poor devil."

I couldn't really explain just why it was that Brink, who was unpleasant to look at and morose and dubious in every way, should still somehow retain something likeable about him, something that made people say 'poor devil.' And if both Ambrose and Gull thought there was something wrong about that motor smash, then it was awful to think of what he had gone through.

I didn't mind Ambrose being asleep this afternoon, because the house felt safe and happy with Nanny in it, so I did actually manage to catalogue quite a lot of Clavering and nobody telephoned and no police turned up, and Gull had enough sense to keep Gilda out for tea.

"Tomorrow," said Ambrose pensively while we were having tea, "I shall be out and about. Shall I tell you something interesting, m'dear?"

"Have you remembered who hit you?" I asked hopefully.

"I was hit from behind," Ambrose pointed out, "so it is most unlikely I would have seen him. No—but our beautiful half-wit, Manon, was at the Billhook that night. She didn't get farther than the entrance, because there was no member to sign her in. . . . I saw her when I went to get those cigarettes I'd left in the cloakroom. . . ."

"I suppose that's interesting," I said sarcastically.

"It is—very," said Ambrose. "It was about nine-thirty. I have an idea she wanted to see Nineveh. It's all most unfortunate for that girl and always has been. She has an unrequited devotion to Nineveh. And that is her sad fate. She always sets her affections on men who don't reciprocate."

"I still don't see," I objected.

"It's merely interesting," said Ambrose thoughtfully. "Manon has this devotion for Nineveh . . . who does not return it. Manon most astonishingly has Nineveh's murdered wife's bag hidden among her blankets. Manon is supposed to have been seen with Nineveh on the night of the murder in a coffee-house. It's all so full of sinister implications that one is tempted to believe that there's some very simple explanation. . . . But one thing I do believe, my sweet, is that the murderer was at the Billhook after the murder."

"And gave Manon the bag?" I asked incredulously. "Then it must have been Paul Nineveh."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said Ambrose vaguely. "I must go and see Mellor and try and persuade him to let me talk to Manon. I shall do so tomorrow unless Brink has materialised in the meantime and given me a really good reason why I shouldn't."

I thought about what he'd said about blackmailing when Edward had got beaten up, but somehow that didn't seem to be true now. But when I said so Ambrose shook his head.

"There's blackmail somewhere," he said almost lazily. "I feel it in my bones. Not the sort I told Mellor. I had to fudge something up then, but I don't really think anyone tells all those young whatnots what to say . . . they just naturally get the wind up and tell lies. That's why it's so difficult to check on alibis or anything. They just say things for no reason at all. Your friend Edward's story about Nineveh being a

receiver, for instance. Pure hooey. Just one of those tales that go round. Nineveh has money and was in love with his wife . . . he wasn't deceived about her, but he was in love with her. And desperately jealous. I don't like the man, but he must have gone through hell. I don't really see why he's got it in for Julian to such an extent. Julian was nothing in Theo's life. She simply made use of him. . . ."

He went into what is known as a 'brown study.' I never have known why it should be called that.

After a while he said, "I would very much like to know why he's got it in for Julian. . . . Mellor is certain that Nineveh is absolutely convinced that Julian did it."

"Does Julian still stick to his story about giving her the key?" I asked.

"He didn't say he gave her the key," Ambrose pointed out. "He says he'd mislaid it and thought she might have it. . . . Yes, he still sticks to it. . . ."

"Well, Brink's story squashes that," I said.

"If it's believed," said Ambrose, "Mellor might easily think Brink had invented it. Brink will have to be more detailed . . . and tell why he wanted to see Theo . . . and even then Julian might have come back and done it. There's no proof at all about this man she was waiting for . . . and why hasn't Julian told that story? It's a better one than his present statement."

He was silent again for a few minutes, and then he sat up straight.

"It's ten to one Julian *did* have a row with her," he said. "I'll bet a tanner he did. Look, Delia—get out the chess-men and let's forget it. Tomorrow is another day."

While I was setting them out Ambrose sat frowning into space.

"You see," he said thoughtfully, "Julian's an ass - We know that. He's neurotic and temperamental. But he's not a fool. He's quite subtle in his own way. If he'd really come back and found her dead as he says, he wouldn't have panicked in just that way. He'd have realised that his best plan would be to get the police at once and tell them the truth. Now what the devil did happen . . . and just what is Brink up to?"

"I don't know," I said truthfully.

"Another glimpse of the obvious," said Ambrose, then picked

up two pawns, one white and one black, and held them behind him.

"Choose," he said.

I got black. It always happens to me and Ambrose always wins with white.

Gilda came back by herself. She said that Gull had to go down to the *Morning Crier*, and he'd ring later. She was rather subdued, but much more normal and talked about going back to her job again.

"I can't do any good just sitting around," she said, "and Julian won't see me."

"Much better," Ambrose assured her.

"I've been an awful fool," she said with a sigh. "It's appalling what a fool one can be and still be convinced all the time that one is being noble and gifted with much more understanding than other people."

"For the love of Mike," said Ambrose anxiously, "don't start morbid self-analysis or anything."

"I'm not," she told him. "But what's so frightening is that one can change so quickly. What was absolutely real the day before yesterday, what I would have sworn could never change doesn't exist any more. So how can one be sure of anything?"

"Meaning," said Ambrose quite cheerfully, "that you've come out of the spell Julian cast over you."

She nodded unhappily.

"Well, it was just that—a spell," said Ambrose. "You didn't try to see outside it."

"The worst of it is," said Gilda, "that Julian will be relying on me more than ever. . . ."

"Then he'll have to stop," said Ambrose callously. "And that won't hurt him, you know. You weren't good for him."

"I suppose not," she said surprisingly. "Ambrose—Gull has telephoned through to Emmie and told her I'm staying here. I gather she's really very angry and offended."

"Silly of her," said Ambrose casually.

At that moment Nanny came in and said that Mr. Palfer had called with Miss Gilda's things, and would like to see Mr. Ambrose for a minute or two.

"Show him in, Nanny," said Ambrose. "And do you think

you could produce the whisky. We may need it to soothe the savage breast."

He looked at Gilda as Nanny went off.

"Let's not make heavy weather," he said. "The thing is to let him think we take it for granted he sees it in the right light."

But when Rannie came in, it was very plain that he wasn't taking it in the right light and didn't intend to. He looked taut and disagreeable and paid no attention to anyone except Ambrose.

"I'm not surprised that Gilda was ashamed to stay on in my wife's house," he said in a thin, mean voice, "after entertaining Brink behind her back. And pouring whisky down his throat."

Ambrose can become very steely and unpleasant himself when he wants to.

"For precisely that reason I thought it better for my cousin to come here," he said in a polite, chill voice. "She will be protected from undesirable visitors of any kind."

"When she appealed to my wife for a haven," said Rannie viciously, "we understood that she disliked your associations with the police. And we also understood from Gull that it would be an act of charity to protect her from herself."

"And now you've done your kind act," said Ambrose, "Gilda will write you a bread and butter letter. As this does not seem likely to develop into a pleasant social call, Delia will wrap up that bottle of whisky, and I hope you will accept it in return for the whisky Gilda dispensed in your house."

He paid no attention at all, but glared at Gilda.

"What did that drunken lunatic Brink say to you?" he demanded.

"Nothing that could possibly interest you," said Ambrose. "Nor can I see why you should think it could."

"The oaf once imagined he was in love with Emmie," said Rannie. "He becomes a nuisance sometimes . . . he talks like a cad. What did he say?"

"I repeat, nothing that could interest you or Emmie," said Ambrose. "Thank you for bringing Gilda's things. Give me that whisky, Delia. I'll see Palfer out."

Gilda was looking very odd. Her lips were set in a contemptuous line and her eyes were very dark, but with a secret

smile in them. She didn't say a word and I was surprised, because Gilda is one who is inclined to crumple up before unpleasantness. But she just stood there looking contemptuous and secretly amused.

I gave Ambrose the bottle, but I also went out of the room after him. Rannie Palfer looked what Nanny would call 'fit to be tied,' and I was quite determined that he wasn't going to have a chance to lose his temper completely and attack Ambrose, when Ambrose was still in such a dicky state. There was a nice solid stick belonging to The Parent in the hall and I made up my mind to grab it at the first sign.

But Rannie didn't do anything more. He simply put the last deep low on to his behaviour by taking the bottle of whisky with him and stalking away without a word of thanks.

I had already grabbed the stick and I stood there with my mouth open, simply paralysed with amazement that anyone could behave like Rannie. Ambrose looked at me and began to laugh.

"How ~~very~~ ferocious," he said, "Delia, what a funny little moppet you are. And what a nice one."

He slipped his arm through mine.

"We'd better go and see how Gilda's bearing up," he said. She was still bearing up astonishingly.

"Thanks a lot, Ambrose," she said. "I'm sorry to have let you in for that scene."

"Not at all," said Ambrose. "But he certainly was annoyed out of all reason."

Gilda went scarlet. The scarlet flowed right up to the roots of her hair.

"He's rather disgusting," she said. "He made passes at me when I was staying there. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't tell Emme. He used to insinuate that anyone who could have—have had an affair with Julian ought not to be anything but humbly pleased if someone like Rannie looked at them. He—he's insanely conceited."

"Dear me," said Ambrose, "what a good thing Brink and Delia together managed to break up your visit to the Palfers'. Well now, after our proud gesture over the whisky, I'm afraid we'll have to broach another bottle. Shall I break the news to Nanny or will you, Delia?"

"You can," I told him firmly.

Then I sat down with a thump on to the settee. What Gilda had just said was simply incredible. . . .

But Gilda suddenly sat down by my side and put her face in her hands.

"Oh God," she said miserably, "what an awful mess I do make of everything. It's all hopeless."

Chapter Fifteen

"It's times that interest me," said Ambrose when he returned from wheedling another bottle of whisky from Nanny. "You know, all the times are so extremely uncertain, and nobody seems to have agreed about them. People have said that Theo and Julian were about at nine o'clock. But no one is really certain. Maybe Mellor has got some reliable witnesses as to time. Did either of you think of asking Brink what time it all happened?"

Obviously he didn't intend to notice Gilda's breakdown. And equally obviously it was a good thing, because Gilda removed her hands from her face, looked across at him and frowned thoughtfully.

"No," she said. "He didn't mention times at all—and we never asked."

"Well, look here," said Ambrose and produced a small notebook and a pencil. "Let's work out a few times. Gilda, you didn't appear at the Billhook until after ten. I take it you can account for your time? Have you told Mellor?"

"Yes, that's all right," said Gilda, quite cheerfully. "I had the wind up a bit at one time, because I stayed on late at the office to finish off some stuff. Everyone else had gone, and I hung on till about half-past nine, because I half expected Julian to ring me. I've been seeing him on and off, and he'd said he had something he wanted to ask me. Anyway, at half-past nine I packed up, went and washed and collected my things, and left. Then I realised I was hungry—so I went into a coffee-bar and had a sandwich. Then I took a taxi to the Billhook. I thought it sounded awfully weak. But it turned out that the fireman in the building noticed I was in the office, and saw me leave. And they remembered me in the snack-bar, and the police found the taxi-man. So it's all right."

"Splendid," said Ambrose.

"The Palfers turned up together about half-past nine . . . so that's clear," I pointed out.

"Thank you," said Ambrose graciously. "I noticed Nineveh and Brink in the Billhook *after* nine-thirty, but I hadn't noticed them before. Well, Mellor can probably do a little checking on their movements. You know, what we really want is a single reliable spy in the Captain's establishment. I should think Edward . . ."

"They don't like Edward," I pointed out helpfully.

"*Someone* likes him," said Ambrose. "I wonder what girl it was that telephoned through that afternoon. . ."

"Edward knows," I said. "But he doesn't want her brought into anything."

Ambrose smiled vaguely.

"Mellor won't do any good fishing in the Captain's waters," he said. "But we might. I rather think that a hint that there is profit to be had if any information comes through and complete secrecy guaranteed might be helpful. In the meantime I wonder if we could get hold of Brink. Gilda—you're the one. Telephone through to that studio place and see if he's there. If he is, say you think I might be able to do something about Manon if he would come along and see me."

When she had gone out of the room he regarded me affectionately.

"You know," he said, "all this would be much simpler if we were married. It's very difficult organising in your papa's house."

"If our married life is going to be one succession of murder mysteries," I told him, "I'll have no part in it."

He paid no attention to that and he'd got his vague look on.

"I rather think I must get hold of Mellor," he went on. "I've got an idea as to how Manon got hold of that bag, and Mellor has been holding out on me. I would very much like to know what was in it."

Gilda came back.

"He's not there," she said. "They haven't seen him at all."

"He'll be there later," said Ambrose. "Delia—that sounds to me like your parent returning, so for the time being I think

we'll drop this subject, otherwise he might wish to hurl me out of the house, and I don't particularly want to be in my own place at the moment."

"Delia," said Gilda, "do you think we might get some of my luggage upstairs? I'd rather like to look fit to be seen before meeting your father."

"That's an idea," said Ambrose cordially. "By the way—how was it, I wonder, that Rannie Palfer knew that Brink had been to see you, Gilda? You didn't leave a farewell note or anything explaining to Emmie, did you?"

We both stared at him.

"No," said Gilda, "we came straight away."

"Curious," said Ambrose. "I'll think about it."

It was very curious, I thought, but when we got up to my room, Gilda shook her head, as if answering something in her own mind.

"You know," she said, "we ought to have left a note for Emmie. It must have looked very odd for me not to be there when she came back."

"We didn't know then that you didn't intend to go back," I argued. "You only meant to come and see Ambrose."

But Gilda was frowning in a puzzled way and biting her lower lip.

"Gull said he'd contact Emmie and explain to her," she said after a while. "I suppose he must have told her about Brink."

I thought myself that Gull would have more sense than to do that, and said so, after it had been agreed in front of him that the Brink matter was to be kept secret—and Gull didn't seem the kind of person who would let one down.

"Then *how* did he know about Brink?" Gilda persisted.

She looked scared and unhappy and I said that it didn't seem worth worrying about.

Gilda said she knew that, but all the same Emmie Palfer was a peculiar sort of woman, and seemed to know things by instinct. For instance, she had said that the Manon girl had been in the Billhook that night . . . and had seemed absolutely furious about it.

"Why should she be furious?" I asked.

Gilda shrugged.

"Emmie's got an idea that women chase Rannie," she said worriedly. "She seemed to think Manon was chasing him. It's awfully odd, because Emmie's the sort of calm, authoritative person who you wouldn't think would have ideas of that sort."

It didn't seem very sinister to me. After all, Ambrose had seen Manon at the Billhook and he thought it was Brink she was looking for—or even Nineveh. Certainly not Rannie.

"I don't know," I said. "Women like that are sometimes quite idiotically jealous and possessive. Maybe Emmie is like that and imagines her husband has a deadly fascination."

"He hasn't," said Gilda moodily. "But he does make passes."

After that we got down to washing and doing faces and that sort of thing and nothing more was said; but at the back of my mind there did linger a worried query. Just how had Emmie and Rannie known that Brink had been to see Gilda? I realised suddenly that we'd been frightfully casual and bad-mannered. We hadn't washed up the glass or put the whisky away again, and must have left the ashtray full of cigarette-ends. Perhaps Brink smoked some special brand and Rannie or Emmie had noticed some of those ends in the ashtray. . . I couldn't believe that Gull had been so stupid as to give us away.

In some way or other Ambrose prevailed upon Edward to produce the girl who had telephoned up about him.

"Don't bring her here," Ambrose said. "Take her along to your own place and Delia and I will come along about two o'clock."

He put down the receiver and smiled sweetly at me.

"Mind you," he remarked, "the night has a thousand eyes and our murderer has only two. I don't really think he has a bevy of spies who can be trailing us around, but it's as well to be discreet. When I leave here I shall drive down to the police station where I have an appointment with Mellor; after that I'll go along to Scipio's where I'll buy you a cocktail. You will put on your most engaging and expensive frock and get to Scipio's by taxi. Look as if you had some extremely high society lunch on. . . . All right?"

"All right," I said.

He glanced at Gilda, who was sorting out some papers and putting them into a brief-case.

"I'm all right," she said. "I'm going to the office and meeting Gull for lunch. He didn't mention Brink to the Palfers, by the way.

"I shouldn't worry about that," said Ambrose casually. "He may easily have noticed the cigarette-ends, as Delia suggested with such acumen."

Gilda shook her head.

"He was smoking Player's," she informed him.

"Look, Gilda," said Ambrose, "Brink may have left something behind—or he may have had one of his unpredictable tempers and rung them up himself and told them. Anything. Don't worry about it."

And that was that. Ambrose went off to see Mellor, Gilda went off to her job, and I put on my new suit and finally went off to Scipio's.

Ambrose was already there. He was sitting in a corner and Gull was with him. They were both looking rather serious, and when I came over to them they hardly smiled.

"Hullo, pet," said Ambrose, "Gull's just going. He ran into Brink this morning and he thinks the man's on the edge of a complete breakdown. I've got to get hold of him before it happens. . . ."

He stood up and wandered over to the bar. Scipio, swarthy and tiny and full of smiles, was already making me a Pimm's. He always insists that I never drink anything else.

"Hullo," said Gull gloomily. "I really do think Brink is just about certifiable. He rang up Emmie last evening and said the most extraordinary things."

"What sort of things?" I asked.

"Oh, he accused Rannie of insulting Manon, and making passes at her. Then he made vague threats and said he'd seen Gilda and it was a good thing she'd left Emmie's house, otherwise Rannie would have made passes at her."

"He did," I told him.

"But that's—that's incredible," said Gull.

"Well, it's true," I insisted. "So perhaps Brink isn't as potty as he seems."

Ambrose returned just at that moment and put down the Pimm's in front of me.

He grinned amiably.

"Delia being indiscreet?" he asked.

"I am not," I said indignantly. "After all, if what Brink says is true about Rannie, and it is, then he's not necessarily potty."

"Rannie must be crazy," said Gull. "How can he—with a wife like Emmie."

"Perhaps that's why," said Ambrose pensively. "Anyone as perfect as she is would drive me to making passes . . . that's why I'm marrying Delia . . . who is far from perfect."

But Gull only shook his head gloomily.

"I like Emmie," he said.

"Liking Emmie is rather like liking the Sphinx," said Ambrose. "Very uncomfortable and difficult."

He changed the subject.

"The contents of Theo Nineveh's handbag were very interesting," he said. "All kinds of compromising notes and letters. . . . No money. Manon's fingerprints all over it, also Theo's. . . . Also Julian's . . . and one unknown."

"So Manon must have known it was there all the time," I said.

"Plainly," said Ambrose in his kindest and most approving manner. "I rather wondered whether she proposed to step into Theo's shoes and do a little gentle blackmailing herself. She'd have come an awful cropper if she had tried . . . she hasn't got the brains or the nerve."

"Hell," said Gull. "Was there anything about Brink in it?"

"Mellor wasn't all that forthcoming," said Ambrose. "But I'm prepared to bet that there had been something in that bag, which pointed direct to the murderer. It had been removed before Manon got hold of it."

"But hell's teeth," expostulated Gull, "surely the man didn't give it to her? It would have been madness."

"No, I rather think she pinched it," said Ambrose. "So does Mellor. But where and when I don't know. . . . And she won't say anything except that it was planted on her. So she'll stay where she is and it's the best place for her. Finish

up that Pimm's, Delia. We'll have lunch somewhere and then get along."

He glanced thoughtfully at Gull.

"Try and get Brink, will you? And try and get him along to see me. I think Pride ought to hear his story," he said.

"I think so too," said Gull. "I'll see what I can do."

He went off looking moody and irritated. Ambrose looked after him doubtfully.

"He's rather fond of Brink," he remarked. "I have an idea he's afraid Brink is our man."

"Well, he could be, after all," I said.

"He could," Ambrose agreed. "But I feel in my bones that if Brink had been going to strangle Theo Nineveh, he'd have done it months ago. There was a note from him in that handbag, by the way. It's made Mellor sit up. I didn't tell Gull."

"What kind of a note?" I asked anxiously.

Ambrose frowned.

"Not a very safe one in view of Brink's own story," he told me. "It was brief and to the point. 'Lay off young Cleghorn,' it said, 'you've done enough harm.'"

"But . . ." I began.

"Yes," said Ambrose grimly; "if Mellor was told that story of Brink's, now that he has that note, he'd jump straight to the conclusion that Brink was 'it.'"

Well, after all, so would anyone. I felt all shivery inside.

"But I don't think it's Brink," said Ambrose slowly. "Come along. We'll have that lunch and then go and see Edward and his lady-love."

Edward's lady-love was a queer-looking girl with long red hair that hung down like Alice's. The one in *Alice in Wonderland*. Only she didn't wear a ribbon round it and it was very coarse and not at all shiny. She had enormous dark eyes and wore tartan drain-pipe trousers and a grubby off-white duffle coat.

She was obviously in a state of adoration about Edward, but not at all keen about Ambrose and me.

"I don't want to be mixed up in all this," she said in a tiresome, shrill voice.

"You won't be," said Ambrose and gave her his most

enchanting smile. "But you don't want to see us all being bashed about, do you?"

"I suppose not," she said reluctantly, but it was plain she was melting.

"You see," said Ambrose and became winning, "the police are no good, and we don't want to drag them in. But we do want to get Julian cleared, don't we, Edward?"

"It's really important, Polly," said Edward. "After all, you don't want the poor chap hanged if he's innocent, do you?"

"I should think he's the most likely one," she demurred.

She had a sulky, pouting little mouth.

"Polly," said Edward, "do think hard. Now quite apart from the usual delizens in Abel Alley, and we don't think it was one of them, can you think who came round the morning after the murder?"

"Well, you know how it is," she said peevishly. "People are always coming in and out. . . . It's like a railway station."

"I know," said Ambrose, "but do you remember anyone, at all?"

"Well, there was that girl who's so positively doting on Julian," she said. "She came round. And so did Paul Nineveh and Brink. But Paul only looked in to see the Captain about something, and you never know what Brink is doing. He just ambles in and says something bitter and goes away again. There wasn't anyone else I noticed . . . oh, except the man who came to see about the gas leak in Julian's room."

"Oh," said Ambrose casually, "was there a gas leak?"

"Probably," said Polly in a bored tone. "There's always something wrong in the place. It's falling to pieces. Nobody expected him, I do know that, but he said Julian had reported the leak . . . and the Captain was furious and said that no one but he was responsible and the gas company had no right to take instructions from anyone but him."

"Thank you," said Ambrose almost reverently. "Thank you a lot. It's too much to hope that you could give a description of the gas-man?"

"Well, I didn't notice him much—naturally," said Polly in a haughty voice. "Except that his hat was much too big. It came down to his ears and he had a little moustache and spectacles."

"Perfect description of disguised murderer," said Ambrose. "Polly, my love, do not mention what you've told me to anyone. Not if you value your life . . . and I'm serious about that. I'm not being frivolous. You saw the murderer, my dear, and it wouldn't do at all for him to know that."

"My lord," said Edward, "you've got it, Ambrose. Polly—you do understand, don't you?"

She burst into tiresome loud sobs.

"Of course I understand," she gulped. "It's horrible of you all. I didn't want to have anything to do with it and now I might be—be murdered."

"Not if you keep quiet," said Ambrose firmly. "If you're doubtful of your ability to do that, then I think it would be better if we removed you somewhere into the country till this is all over . . . but it would be much better if you just carried on as usual. Less likely to cause our gas man to take an undesirable interest in you."

She went on sobbing noisily and I saw Edward making up his mind to rise to the occasion.

"I tell you what, Polly," he said nobly. "You move in here with me for a while. That won't cause any comment at all. They'll merely think we're having an affair and that it's the most natural thing in the world."

It was plain that this appealed enormously to her. She stopped sobbing and gazed with bleary adoration at Edward.

"That would be wonderful," she said. "But what about my modelling?"

"Oh," said Edward grandly, "you can afford to give that up for a while and have a holiday. I'm not broke."

"Oh, Edward," she said quite blissfully.

"Splendid," said Ambrose heartily, "Edward will look after you." "

He beamed at her and stood up.

"I can't tell you how grateful I am," he said. "When this is all over, we must have a party."

Edward saw us to the door. He still looked consciously noble.

"Look here," said Ambrose seriously, "don't let her out of your sight. She's a born babbler really. And thanks, Edward, you're a hero. I'll keep you posted."

"I suppose you're certain he's the chap," said Edward.

"Quite sure," said Ambrose. "The only trouble is we still don't know who he is. But, don't worry—we will."

When we got outside he got into the car and drove off without even looking to see if there was anyone around.

Chapter Sixteen

WHEN Gilda came back that evening she had a bee in her bonnet that it simply could not be anyone else except either Brink or Paul Nineveh who killed Theo. Ambrose was out and we sat in the morning-room and drank coffee, while Gluckstein sat on the table and looked superior. I pointed out to Gilda that Paul Nineveh and Brink had both been at Abel Alley quite undisguised the morning after Theo had been killed; but she simply wouldn't have anything to do with Ambrose's theory about the gas-man. She merely said mulishly that he probably *was* a gas-man and that Ambrose had been reading too many detective stories.

She hadn't seen Gull since I had and, of course, didn't know about the note from Brink that had been found in Theo's bag. I didn't tell her because I wasn't certain Ambrose would like it, and anyway she was so dead-set that it might be Brink that if I'd told her about it she was quite capable of rushing off to Mellor and telling him Brink's story—and that, I was quite certain, would be fatal.

She was in a nervy, restless state again, and obviously desperately anxious to do something decisive about it all, and she was inclined to think that Gull was too anxious to keep Brink out of it.

"He's got a thing about that man," she insisted. "Just because he believes he wasn't really guilty in that manslaughter case. I simply don't see why. There he was in the driving seat and dead drunk. . . ."

It was after dinner and we were on our own. Gull had had to go off on some assignment and The Parent was at some explorers' gathering. I hadn't the slightest idea where Ambrose had gone or when he would be back, and I began to get rather bothered. What I mean is I'm younger than Gilda and it's all very well Ambrose instructing me to

keep her under control. She was very obviously getting out of control. I sympathised with her, but I felt it was very awkward.

And then the telephone rang and before I could get to it Gilda took the call. I found that quite infuriating. I really do not consider it at all proper to snatch the telephone in someone else's house. And it was Edward. The silly dope went and spilled the beans to her before I could get on to him, and, of course, it couldn't have been more inflammatory with Gilda in the state she was.

He'd got hold of some story from what he pompously called unimpeachable sources, that on the night of Brink's car smash Theo and Paul Nineveh had been in the car with him. He'd already told Gilda and he told it over again to me when at last I was able to speak to him.

"Well, why didn't Brink say so?" I asked.

"Well, perhaps he was so tight that he didn't remember," said Edward.

That, somehow, didn't seem awfully likely to me. After all, one would be shocked into remembering. . . .

"And, what's more, this chap says he's pretty certain that the rumour at the time was that Brink wasn't even driving, but when it happened they shoved him into the driver's seat and bolted," said Edward.

"Who told you this?" I asked.

I really did feel I was being pretty detached and firm about it all, but Gilda kept tugging at my sleeve and muttering, "Don't be silly. It sounds absolutely true to me . . . and that's why he killed her."

"I can't tell you," said Edward. "The chap who told me was very thick with the Ninevehs at one time, particularly with Theo, but he won't hear of being quoted. Only he insists that it's true. . . ."

"Well, what's the use if he won't come forward and back up what he says?" I asked.

"It gives us another line to work on," said Edward vaguely. "You can tell Ambrose and he'll probably know what to do. I have to go and prevent Polly going out to a club now. Good-bye, Delia dear."

He rang off and I wished fervently that he'd never rung up.

Gilda had the bit between her teeth and was positively pawing the ground.

"I'm going round to see Paul Nineveh," she said. "I'll bluff him into telling me whether it's true or not. . . ."

Of course, I could see quite well that if it was true, it made a terribly strong motive for Brink. But, in that case, why not murder Paul as well—and above all why not say at the time that they had been there? I pointed this out to Gilda, who just looked at me contemptuously and said, "At the time I expect the poor idiot was infatuated with her, and stood the racket for her sake . . . and then she let him down. She would."

Well, of course, there was something in that angle, but what earthly good did she think she'd do by going and seeing Paul Nineveh? He wasn't likely to admit it.

"I've got to do something," she said, and began twisting her hands together frantically.

"Ambrose will do something when he gets back," I insisted. "Look, Gilda, you'll only muddle everything and give them warning and all that if you go barging in. . . . You *must* wait for Ambrose."

"Oh, he and Gull are both alike," she said scornfully. "Talk and talk and do nothing. They get information and don't use it. I'm going to find Nineveh."

She rushed out of the room, snatched up her coat from the hall and rushed out of the house. I only hoped she wouldn't find him, and couldn't think of anything to do about it. I wasn't sure where Ambrose was, though there was a chance he might be hobnobbing with Mellor at the police station. So I got on the telephone and asked and he was there. He came to the telephone and sounded not at all pleased.

"My sweet," he said, and sounded acid, "if there is one thing you must learn, it is not to be the little woman and try and contact me all round town whenever you feel lonely."

"Don't be peculiar," I said tersely. "Gilda's gone out of her mind, and has gone rushing off to find Paul Nineveh and accuse him of being with Brink in that smash, and of driving himself, and pushing Brink into the driving seat and then bolting. . . ."

There was a moment's silence, and I got the impression that Ambrose said something to Mellor, and had put his hand over

the mouthpiece to stop me hearing. Then he came on the line again.

"Hop into a taxi and come down here," he said. "I think Mellor had better be in on this."

I found that surprising, because I had expected he wouldn't want Mellor to know about it, but I phoned a cab, and it turned up in five minutes. The driver looked quite unmoved when I told him where to go, which was rather daunting really. One would expect him to show some astonishment when a girl wants to go to a police station. It never occurred to me that he might just think I was going to collect something I'd lost.

"Don't worry," said Mellor heavily after I'd told them about Edward, and how it had affected Gilda. "She won't find Nineveh. He's out of town. He's gone down to a small cottage he owns near Henley."

Then he smiled stolidly.

"And she won't come to any harm," said Ambrose quite placidly, "because if she rushed out in that state, one of Mellor's excellent henchmen was hanging about outside, and he'd go after her. If only she could collect Brink and get him to your house, it wouldn't be too bad."

"If she meets Brink and hurls that story at him," observed Mellor, "she's asking for trouble, I should say."

He put on a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles which made him look owlsh, and picked up some typewritten papers.

"Well," he said, "it's all very interesting. The gas company never sent a man to Abel Alley, and a constable on the beat near there found a hat and jacket tossed over a wall into a bombed site. Up to now we haven't been able to trace where they came from. . . ."

"It could be," said Ambrose helpfully, "that someone among the characters in this drama goes in for amateur theatricals, and keeps a few props of that kind about the place."

"It could be," said Mellor. "I don't see Nineveh or Brink indulging in that pastime, though."

"Possibly not," said Ambrose politely.

"But I'll bear it in mind," Mellor assured him in his most velvety voice.

"And you'll let me see Manon tomorrow?" said Ambrose in a gentle and appealing voice.

"Yes. . . . I'll arrange that," said Mellor.

"And if I get any sense out of her, you'll arrange for another remand of a week?" urged Ambrose.

"Yes—we'll do that," Mellor told him.

"I'll get her to plead guilty," said Ambrose. "And we'll go for extenuating circumstances or something. I'd hate Brink to think I'd double-crossed him."

"Oh yes—Brink," said Mellor.

"Don't go getting any wrong ideas," said Ambrose.

"The trouble with this case is that ideas keep whirling up all the time," said Mellor gloomily. "There's no sense in it at all."

"That's what we were meant to think," said Ambrose.

Mellor looked suddenly troubled.

"You know, I don't like it," he said. "If this new story about Brink has any truth in it. . . . I don't like to think about the poor devil. But if there is any truth, why didn't he say something at the time?"

"Amnesia?" suggested Ambrose, but without conviction.

Mellor shook his head.

"I don't think so. The doctor didn't think so. There was only one thing and that was the doctor didn't think he was badly injured as he ought to have been if he was behind the wheel when the crash occurred. But the defence didn't bring that up for some reason. . . ."

"I always had the impression that Brink wasn't trying to defend properly," said Ambrose, "but not for the sake of Theo Nineveh."

Oh, go away," said Mellor. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'm going," Ambrose told him. "I hope your sleuth won't try and interfere if Gilda picks up with Brink?"

"He'll only interfere if she seems likely to be in danger of bodily harm," said Mellor. "There's a squad car on the prowl too, just in case she thinks of going off with someone in an automobile."

Ambrose grinned quite gracelessly.

"You think of everything," he said. "I will now take Delia home to her papa."

We left Mellor staring morosely at his typescript and went out to Ambrose's car.

"I thought you weren't going to tell him about Polly and the gas-man," I said.

"That was for Polly's benefit," said Ambrose. "Mellor can put a dozen men on to unravel that little mystery. That jacket and cap must have come from somewhere, and it's a routine job finding out where. I have *not*—repeat *not*, told him what Brink said to you and Gilda . . . and if that emotional halfwit gives it away, I'll kill her."

He started the engine and let in the clutch.

"By the way," he said as we started for home, "Julian has altered his statement. It seems that Theo persuaded him to take her along to Gilda's flat on the pretext of stealing some whisky or gin . . . and when they got there, she did say quite blandly that he could buzz off for an hour, as she'd arranged to meet someone there. He was naturally annoyed to find he'd been strung along like that and said, 'Nothing doing' . . . Then she said something diabolical, and he clocked her and with his usual impetuosity bolted. He stayed away and had some drinks and when he came back he found her dead, lost his head and didn't stop to find what had killed her, but thought he must have done it when he clocked her. . . . In view of what Brink said, it sounds as if he's speaking the truth. As for his fingerprints being all over the place, he says that he'd been there during the afternoon listening to the wireless and having a private drink—that he often did that when Gilda was out and when he felt fed up with his friends."

"I see," I said doubtfully.

"But what about the wireless being on and only Gilda's prints on the knob?" I asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine," said Ambrose. "Mine is that our murderer wore gloves, that he was a very unpleasant fellow indeed, and turned the wireless on as a particularly cruel jibe. I looked up the *Radio Times* for that evening, and just about the time when I imagine Theo was killed, some orchestra was playing *Funeral March* for a *Marionette*."

"Beastly," I said and shivered.

"It will give me a great deal of pleasure to lay this fellow by the heels," said Ambrose grimly.

It was a heavenly clear night with a lot of stars, and as I got out of the car when Ambrose pulled up in front of the house I could see The Parent's tobacco plants like lovely pale stars in the milky light. Then just as I went through the wrought-iron gate in the wall a figure stepped out from inside and nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Sorry," said a tired, slightly sardonic voice. "It's me. Brink. I got the idea that your fiancé was anxious to talk with me."

"You're more than right," said Ambrose from behind me. "But is there any need to be so very Lycæum melodrama? Why not just go up to the house and ring the bell?"

"I did," said Brink, "and was told everyone was out. The good lady who opened the door evidently didn't consider me a fit person to be left alone with the spoons, so I just waited out here."

"Yes," said Ambrose pleasantly, "Nanny is a little conventional in her outlook. Never mind, she'll let you in if we vouch for you."

It was odd the way he and Brink seemed to understand one another, and how what Ambrose had just said didn't sound really rude. It sounded almost like family humour. . . . Brink actually laughed. Somehow I hadn't ever imagined he could laugh.

I was beginning to feel that Brink most certainly never had killed Theo Nineveh and that, as Ambrose would tell me, is the most fatal attitude to adopt. One simply must keep an open mind, even about one's own family and best friends, when it came to murder.

However, into the house we went, and Nanny came out of the kitchen to see whether we wanted anything, and when Ambrose told her whisky and coffee, and she saw Brink, she primped up her lips and said very formally, "Very good, Mr. Ambrose." Then she went back into the kitchen simply exuding disapproval.

"Just how bad mannered were you?" Ambrose asked Brink, with casual interest.

"I wasn't really," said Brink quite apologetically. "I was

feeling nervy and fed up . . . and I suppose I said 'Oh hell.'"

"Quite enough," said Ambrose. "You'll be in her bad books for ever now."

We were in the morning-room by now, and Gluckstein jumped off the table, where he had been sitting apparently ever since I went out, and started telling Ambrose about how abominable everything was, and how everyone had gone out and left him alone. He ignored me completely, being deeply offended, but to my surprise spoke to Brink.

The curtains had not been drawn and the small garden was milky with starlight and everything was very quiet. Brink sat down in the window-seat. He seemed suddenly very far away, as if he wasn't quite real.

Nanny came in with the whisky tray and put it down in stately silence.

"The coffee will be about ten minutes, Miss Delia," she said. "And I'll put out the plum cake."

"I apologise to you," said Brink suddenly.

Nanny looked at him and astonished me just as Gluckstein had. The expression she used to her naughty children came into her face.

"I should think so," she said severely. "There's never any excuse for losing your self-control. Never mind."

She exited magnificently.

Ambrose chuckled.

"You're lucky she didn't tell you to go and wash your hands and that it was time you had your hair cut," he observed.

Brink laughed himself.

"I should have no choice but to do as I was told," he said ruefully.

It was really too maddening, I was becoming more and more pro-Brink.

"Have a drink," said Ambrose, "and then we'll talk."

Gilda didn't come back till much later, when Brink had gone. She was escorted by a disgruntled and not very agreeable Gull, who said he had caught up with her at the Billhook where she was very foolishly having a row with Emmie Palfer. Neither of them, however, vouchsafed any further information and Gilda trailed drearily upstairs to bed.

Chapter Seventeen

I lay awake for a long time that night thinking over Ambrose's interview with Brink. I simply couldn't see that it had got us any farther, except that Brink had been quite indifferent as to whether Mellor heard his story or not. Even when Ambrose told him about the note which had been found in Theo's bag, he had still been indifferent.

"I didn't do it," he said, "and personally, even if I was brought to trial, I don't think any jury would convict. I know it can be made to look damning—but then you see it can also be made to look damning against Julian."

"Not so damning," said Ambrose deliberately, "and the Julian angle could rob you of a great deal of sympathy . . . suppose twelve good men and true think you allowed him to be arrested and go through all that agony of mind when you could have told your own story at once."

Brink shrugged.

"She was alive when I left her," he pointed out. "But Julian could have done it when he came back. It's fifty-fifty."

It went on and on like that until I got sleepy and bored, but Ambrose didn't seem to find it boring, and I could only suppose that he had found out some few things of interest. But it did slowly seep through my mind that what was bothering Brink intensely was who had put that wretched bag in Manon's bed; and also that he was quite convinced that Manon had not pinched it as Ambrose said she had.

Finally Brink departed, insisting that he didn't care what use Ambrose made of the fact that he had been to Gilda's flat that night, and also insisting that if Ambrose liked to find out who had put the bag into Manon's bed, he, Brink, might be able to give him some further information. It did become quite plain that it was very important to him, and equally plain that he was afraid it might be one particular person. But why he should be afraid I couldn't guess.

There was one thing that did give me a queer, shivery feeling, and that was the way he looked when Ambrose, quite casually, told him about Edward's story that Theo and Nineveh were with him in the car smash. Just for a split second he looked quite crazy with rage, and then he smiled unpleasantly.

"I haven't any idea about that," he said. "And, anyway, I'm prepared to swear it's not true."

"I see," said Ambrose. "Well—maybe you're right. If you didn't want anything said at the time of your trial, I agree there doesn't seem to be much point in bringing it up now—and—of course—it would be an added point for the prosecution just suppose you were accused of Theo's murder."

"Precisely," said Brink.

"I see your point," said Ambrose, and there was a slight edge to his voice.

"You don't, you know," said Brink, and suddenly laughed. "You don't, my dear Merriman. If you did you'd know a lot more than you do."

And with that he went off.

Ambrose saw him to the front door, and then came back and poured himself out a stiff drink.

"Poor devil," he said. "Now I wonder who else besides Theo was in the car with him that night. If I know that, I would—as he truly says—know a great deal."

He frowned heavily.

"The worst of all this sort of thing is that one has to pry into people's most private loves and hates," he said slowly. "I don't want to know, but I've got to find out just who meant so much to Brink that he was prepared to take a manslaughter rap for them without making any kind of fight."

"Theo herself," I suggested vaguely.

But Ambrose shook his head.

"Brink never liked Theo," he said. "I know that. Gull knows it too. I wonder. . . ."

He stopped dead and scowled again.

"I wonder if Gull has any idea," he murmured. "Gull knew him very well round about that time."

"If Gull had any idea," I said doubtfully, "wouldn't he have said something or done something at the time? I mean, he was very upset about it, wasn't he?"

"M'yes," said Ambrose, "but then you see, poppet, if he knew Brink wanted it kept quiet . . . well, he couldn't very well do anything, could he? I disapprove very much of doing people good despite themselves—it almost always ends in disaster."

Well, I could understand that, but all the same it did seem a pity. It seemed almost as if this murder would not have taken place if Brink hadn't been in that smash and been sentenced for manslaughter. I suggested that to Ambrose, and he laughed without any amusement at all.

"Just for once, poppet," he said, "you've hit the nail bang on the head. That's exactly how it is, and now we've got to find out who Brink was in love with at that time . . . and I don't like it. It's going to be pure hell for him all over again."

I went to sleep at last still trying to imagine the sort of person Brink would love . . . and somehow I couldn't imagine him in love with anyone. I had imagined he was in love with Manon, but it was obvious that it was nothing of the sort. He was always on the side of the underdog, and he thought she'd had a rotten deal, and someone had 'framed' her. Quite suddenly I didn't at all like the idea of what might happen if he found out who had done it . . . especially if it turned out to be the person he was afraid it was. Then I remembered with relief that Ambrose was quite sure no one had done anything of the sort, and so I was quite sure too, and then I went to sleep.

Next morning Ambrose went off quite early to meet Mellor and go with him to see Manon, and Gilda seemed in no particular hurry to get off to her office. She drank three cups of coffee and smoked three cigarettes, and was barely civil to The Parent, who looked frosty, and departed to his lair much quicker than usual after breakfast.

Gilda lit another cigarette, got up from the table with nervous haste and said, "Emmie Palfer is a little crazy, I think."

I should have said myself that crazy was just about the last description to apply to Emmie Palfer, but I didn't argue about it. After all, one is awfully inclined to say people are crazy if

they happen not to agree with one—or if one has a quarrel with them.

"After all," said Gilda, "it wasn't my fault that Brink turned up, was it?"

"Certainly not," I said obligingly.

"But I don't know," said Gilda with a suddenly puzzled air, "just why I let him into the house so meekly. You know it just didn't somehow occur to me not to."

"It just happened," I pointed out. "You remember—we got into a rather important conversation on the doorstep . . . and then you said we'd better come in. It was very normal really."

"Yes," she said worriedly. "But, of course, I needn't have lashed out the whisky that way."

"That was my fault," I said generously. "I'll tell Emmie Palfer so if you like. Anyway, Rannie got a full bottle out of us in return."

"You might have thought," said Gilda, still worrying the subject like a dog at a bone, "that she didn't want Julian cleared of this beastly murder. After all, in something so important what does it matter if you let someone in for a time who has something important to tell you?"

"Gilda," I exclaimed, "you didn't tell Emmie what Brink told us, did you?"

She went a brilliant scarlet.

"I did," she said miserably. "I lost my temper completely and blurted it out at her."

That was really shocking. After all, losing your temper is one thing, but blurting out something as important and secret as that about someone else is really the end.

"Oh, I know," said Gilda. "It's no good looking at me like that. It was the deep low. . . . Gull was furious."

"I should think so," I said without sympathy. "I don't trust that woman a yard. She'll go telling it all over the place."

"I don't think she will," said Gilda, in an odd, bewildered way. "You see, when I did say it she simply spat out, 'That's a lie. Everyone knows it was Julian, and everyone knows you're so infatuated that you'd make up anything to get him off. You'd even try and hang a wretched drunk like Brink.' At that moment Gull came up and said something pretty terse

to Emmie, but he was absolutely livid with me. He just grabbed my elbow and marched me out of the place."

I was pretty sorry for her really. But all the same it was an appalling way for her to have behaved, and I don't know, but I had a perfectly horrible premonition that it was dangerous in some way. To her somehow—and also to me.

"Did you tell her you'd told Ambrose?" I asked.

"I didn't tell her anything more," said Gilda. "I don't think she even realised that you were there that morning. She seemed to think I'd had a *tête-à-tête* with Brink, and had then rushed out of the house and come to you."

"Well, it can't be helped," I said gloomily. "We'll have to wait and see what Ambrose thinks about it. You didn't also tell her what Edward said, did you?"

"No, I didn't," said Gilda. "Delia, I'm awfully sorry. I feel ghastly about it all. But I promise you I won't try any other stunts about Paul Nineveh or anything. I promise."

"Oh, well," I said, fairly magnanimously, "don't let it really get you down. But you'd better be careful or probably Ambrose will have you locked up in Holloway. He's rather strong on protective custody these days."

She gave a very wan smile and said well, she'd better go and do some work. It seemed about the only time when she didn't get into trouble, and if I saw Gull would I try and explain to him because he was absolutely furious with her and she couldn't bear much more.

I told her I didn't expect I would see him and she said he might easily come round, you never knew, and she couldn't imagine what he saw in Emmie Palfer. I didn't comment on that either, but up to now Gilda had been a great fan of Emmie's and had lauded her up to the skies.

She went off still looking shaken, and I went and had a cup of coffee with Nanny and discussed things with her in a superficial sort of way. She is a very comforting sort of person to talk to, because she is always quite definite about things, and has a kind of wholesome, bread-and-butter-pudding goodness. Also she always seems to know how the people she knew as children will turn out, and what they would do and what they wouldn't. She was quite positive about Julian.

"He never did it, Miss Delia," she said. "He was a very

difficult boy, and deceitful, I'm afraid; but if he'd done something like that he couldn't keep it to himself for long. He never could. He'd make up stories and tell lies, but he always had to confess in the end. He'd try not to—but he always did."

So I told her about Brink and she thought for a few moments. Of course, she hadn't known Brink when he was a boy, but she is really awfully good about judging people—and very fair even when she disapproves.

"Well, I shouldn't worry your head about him, Miss Delia," she said firmly. "Not that I think he's the one who killed the poor lady. I don't. But he's got a grievance, and I never could abide people or children who nursed grievances. It does them no good, nor anyone round them, and they get silly ideas about other people. Just leave him to Mr. Ambrose, there's a good child. Don't you get worrying about him."

Well, I was glad she didn't think Brink had done it, even if it didn't get me very far. But it did, as it were, eliminate two people I wanted eliminated, and so while I was about it, I asked her what she thought of Edward. Not, naturally, that there was any suspicion attached to him, but I was just inquisitive as to what she thought.

"Oh, that young man," she said indulgently. "Well, I wouldn't take everything he says too seriously, my dear. Romantic is what he is—like that little Gerry Talbot who lived over at the Grange. Gets excited and makes more of things than there is to them. But I expect Mr. Ambrose knows that."

"Oh, Mr. Ambrose knows everything," I said rather crossly.

"Now then—jealousy is a green-eyed cat," said Nanny severely.

"I am *not* jealous!"

However. . . .

I kissed Nanny by way of apology and went back to the morning-room and Gluckstein. I was really *anxious* for Ambrose to come back, because a vague misty alarm was floating about in my mind after what Gilda had done. I wished I'd got Nanny's opinion on Gilda too, but I couldn't go back and ask her, because she had to be led up to these things, and if I just went and asked her flat out, she'd make snubbing remarks about curiosity and dead cats.

One thing did bother me a lot. I wasn't at all sure about Gilda. If she'd lost her temper and blurted out about Brink and Julian and the flat, it seemed to me awfully probable that she'd also blurted out what Edward said about the Ninevehs' being in the car with Brink. The more I thought about it, the more gloomily certain I became that she must have done so. She had had such a thing about it the moment she'd heard. She'd gone rushing off to find Nineveh with that idea boiling round in her mind. It was awfully probable she'd done just that thing, and that other people had heard her.

The only thing that happened while I was waiting for Ambrose was that Emmie Palfer rang up. Her voice was just as rich and warm and friendly over the wire as it was when you met her face to face. She sounded kindly and indulgent.

"My dear," she said, "I really must see Ambrose and get his advice. That silly girl Gilda is going round and making the most absurd assertions, and she really ought to be stopped for her own sake."

I told her Ambrose wasn't in and I didn't know when to expect him.

"My dear," she said, "it's important. I'm so sorry Rannie came round and was tiresome the other evening, but all this has been getting on his nerves and he simply can't stand Brink, you know. He hates drunks, and really Brink is one. I think it was too bad of Gilda to let him into our house."

"How did you know he'd been?" I asked pensively.

"Oh—too maddening for words," she said. "He met Rannie somewhere that afternoon. At the tube station as a matter of fact. He was horribly drunk—Brink, I mean—and he said in the most insolent way that he had no opinion of our taste in interior decoration, but our whisky was quite good. Then he said in a sly, tipsy way, that he had told Gilda something that ought to help Julian and then lurched off. I do think Rannie was justified in being annoyed."

I wasn't going to bandy words over the telephone, so I simply said maybe he had and that I'd let Ambrose know she'd called.

"Look, Delia," she insisted, "this is important for all of us. Please don't be obstructive and childish. Gilda will get herself into severe trouble and she must be stopped."

"I'll tell Ambrose what you say," I answered politely, and rang off.

I guessed Ambrose would see her, but I wasn't going to make it easy. If she was going to call me childish and obstructive, I could be just like that. So I strolled back to the morning-room and talked to Gluckstein and tried to pretend to myself that I wasn't in a flat spin.

Chapter Eighteen

WHEN Ambrose did at last come back, he was looking quite pleased with himself. It was one of England's rare warm days and he was wearing his Palm Beach coat and Panama hat, which he insists on doing in spite of the things people say about it.

"I'm delighted to be able to tell you that poor Manon will probably be locked up for another two weeks," he said. "That should keep her out of mischief."

"It sounds rather harsh to me," I told him.

"Maybe," he said. "But I know now where she got hold of that bag and she'll be safer in a nice quiet cell for the time being."

"Where?" I asked.

He pretended not to hear and it's no use nattering at him when he does that; he can be deaf as an adder. So instead I told him about Emmie Palfer and he looked at me blankly.

"Absurd," he said. "Why should she imagine I'm in the least interested in her domestic problems? They've got rid of Gilda so Brink won't defile their well-appointed residence again. If she rings again, tell her I've gone to Birmingham."

"Well, that's not quite all," I told him and repeated what Emmie had alleged Gilda had said in the Billhook.

"And," I added, "I do think it's unkind of Emmie to keep on assuring Gilda that Julian's guilty. After all, she may believe that—lots of people do; but if you're supposed to be one of Gilda's friends it's not very tactful."

"Oh, Emmie's the sort of woman who believes in telling people home truths for their own good," said Ambrose indifferently. "I don't suppose she would like it much if people started telling her about her husband's flirtatious ways."

"I should think she knows that," I told him. "Women always do, you know, even when they pretend they don't. Emmie would never admit it. I don't think she'd even let

Rannie know she knew anything; it would be too much of a let-down to her pride."

"Such a clever psychologist," said Ambrose admiringly.

He pulled out a pocket diary and looked at the end where he writes down telephone numbers.

"I think I'll get hold of Brink and put his mind at rest about Manon," he remarked.

It didn't seem to me that Brink's mind would really be put at rest if he heard she was going to be kept in prison; but Ambrose has some very odd ideas about what will calm and cheer people. I suggested that as Brink appeared to be quite fond and concerned about Manon, he might not be cheered to hear she was going to be kept in prison.

"The way I'll tell him will cheer him," said Ambrose placidly. "What was worrying him was not so much Manon, as you well know, but *who* had planted the wretched bag on her. Well, his mind will be at rest. Nobody did. She pinched it."

"That," I said hopelessly, "is too much. Don't tell me that Manon also visited Gilda's flat."

"No," he said. "But that's all I'm going to tell you just now. I'll telephone Brink. He's certain to be in that Fleet Street pub. . . . He haunts the place at lunch-time. A form of self-torture, I suppose. He was once a very good journalist."

He rang through to the pub and Brink was there. I imagined that he would tell him there and then about Manon, but all he did was to say he had some news, and Brink had better meet him about six o'clock in the Billhook. Then he put down the receiver, grinned at me in the most maddening way and said, "I'll tell you very soon, pet; but just at the moment it's best you don't know too much."

But just then, before I could really tell him the fury that boiled in my heart, the telephone rang again. Ambrose took the call and I saw him look really shocked for the first time.

"Don't be a fool, Mellor," he said sharply. "She couldn't have. You said yourself he was down in that cottage of his."

He listened again and I could positively imagine how velvety and boding Mellor sounded at the other end of the line.

"I'll come down straight away," said Ambrose curtly. "I'll

bring Delia. She saw her last night before she went out, and she knows the approximate time and all that. Hell! Hell and Lucifer and all the fallen angels! I'll be right along."

He put down the telephone and stared at me.

"Paul Nineveh was murdered last night in his flat," he told me tonelessly. "It was tried to make it appear suicide . . . but it was murder all right. They think it was Gilda, Cofne on."

"But it's ridiculous," I stammered. "She was at the Billhook and Gull brought her home."

"As usual," said Ambrose grimly, "there's a time lag. Now hurry."

On the way to see Mellor I went over and over in my mind just exactly what had happened when Gilda went out of her mind and rushed off saying she was going to see Nineveh. It must have been about nine o'clock. And then I remembered something. . . .

"Ambrose," I said, "how on earth can they think Gilda had anything to do with this? You know that Mellor said—or you did—that if she rushed out in that state one of Mellor's men would follow her."

"The chap may have slipped up," said Ambrose. "Wait till we get there, moppet, before we start speculating. It's Mellor's turn to speak first."

Quite suddenly, like a sort of vision, I saw Brink's face when Ambrose had suggested that Paul Nineveh might have been in the car with him, and a trickle of pure horror went down my spine. Suppose it was *Brink* who'd killed Nineveh—then it was awfully easy to understand that flash of fury . . . and, perhaps, panic.

I started to say something to Ambrose about it, but he had turned into the yard behind the police station and it was too late. He switched off, leaned across me to swing the car door open, got out himself and began to walk purposefully towards the entrance. Sometimes I think that Ambrose knows when I want to tell him something he doesn't want to hear; there was something very putting-off about the set of his shoulders. Then we were in the place and being ushered along to Mellor's office.

Mellor was looking far more sinister and dangerous than he had appeared that night in Gilda's flat. He was rather white round the lips and nostrils, but with anger, not shock or anything.

"Come in, Miss Brown," he said heavily. "Sit down, will you? Now perhaps you can tell me exactly what happened previous to Miss Herring leaving your father's house last night."

I opened my mouth, shut it again and looked frantically at Ambrose.

"Tell him, my poppet," said Ambrose. "Tell him exactly."

"I told him last night," I said rather coldly.

After all, I *had* told him, and I wasn't going to allow myself to be afraid—or bullied.

"I know," said Mellor, "I'd like to hear it again, with the exact times if possible."

Well, it wasn't possible. After all, you don't time people when they get emotional and rush out of places. I told him so.

However, he was horribly patient, and we worked it out that it must have been ten minutes past nine when Gilda rushed out, and about five minutes to nine when Edward telephoned. And when that had been established to everyone's satisfaction, Ambrose smiled dreamily.

"Couldn't your man put the time exactly?" he asked.

Mellor went a dull, angry red.

"If you must know," he said, "the fool had taken a stroll round the corner and missed her. I'll have him back on the beat, the useless idiot."

"Tiresome," murmured Ambrose. "And now you tell us a timetable."

"One thing first," said Mellor grimly. "Did you see Brink last night?"

"I did," said Ambrose.

"What time?" snapped Mellor.

"I didn't notice," said Ambrose blandly.

"Look here, Merriman," said Mellor. "This is murder."

"Look here," said Ambrose, "this is my foolish cousin you're trying to catch. She's an idiot, but not a murderess and I'm not saying anything until I know a little more. How was he killed and when?"

"He was poisoned," said Mellor. "A nice, neat, woman's job."
His voice was absolutely dark-brown velvet, and he sounded deliberately beastly.

"What kind of poison?" asked Ambrose casually.

"Cyanide," said Mellor. "There was a suicide note too . . ."

He leaned back so that his chair tilted, put his hands in his pockets and gazed at the ceiling.

"Are you suggesting," said Ambrose, "that he had a chummy little party with my cousin Gilda, who persuaded him to write a suicide note, and then handed him a tumbler of poison?"

"Not exactly," said Mellor, still gazing at the ceiling. "It was poured down his throat. Someone caught hold of him from behind by the hair, jerked his head back, and as he opened his mouth as anyone would, neatly poured the stuff down him. Then they scribbled a few words in a fair imitation of Nineveh's own writing and departed."

"I presume you have some grounds for this brilliant description of the crime?" said Ambrose in a queer, hard voice.

"Hair pulled so hard that a tuft almost pulled out," said Mellor. "Back of the head bruised by being banged against the sharp-edged back of the chair. Glass put back neatly on the table which doesn't usually happen when a man has just swallowed anything like cyanide. And he had slumped backward, not forward . . . sliding down in the chair with his head lolling backwards and sideways. You can have a chat with the police surgeon if you like."

"Fingerprints?" asked Ambrose very quietly.

Mellor removed his gaze from the ceiling and let his chair drop forward again. He looked gloomily but relentlessly at Ambrose.

"That's the point," he said. "There weren't any."

He began to doodle on a grubby piece of blotting paper.

"How long had he been dead?" asked Ambrose.

"Mr. Merriman, you know better than that," said Mellor glumly. "He might have died at any time between seven and ten o'clock last night. He was found this morning at eleven o'clock by his charlady, who has a key to his flat. He'd been dead at least thirteen or fourteen hours . . . at *least*. But not longer than sixteen. . . ."

He went on doodling. Ambrose said nothing, and my heart beat so heavily and slowly that I felt as if everyone must hear it.

"Miss Herring had been to the flat," said Mellor at last. "Her fingerprints were on the knocker and on the bell push."

"It doesn't follow that she got in," said Ambrose.

"Quite," said Mellor.

He added suddenly in a savage mutter, "I'll break that fellow for this."

Ambrose was silent for about a minute. He looked white and tired, and indescribably regretful.

"Brink," he said, "had a motive for doing in Paul Nineveh, if it is true that the man was in the car the night of Brink's crash."

"There was not a trace of any fingerprints other than those of Miss Herring on the door or in the flat," said Mellor.

"What did this suicide note say?" asked Ambrose slowly.

And when Mellor told him, he shrugged resignedly.

Apparently it was short and written unevenly, as if Nineveh had been overcome by emotion. It was simply "I can't stand it any more. . . . I killed my wife. . . . She had gone too far. Paul Nineveh."

Just precisely, of course, what Gilda would have wanted him to say. Something that cleared Julian once and for all.

"Have you any idea when Nineveh came back to town?" asked Ambrose.

"He left his cottage at six o'clock by car and drove straight to his flat, according to the time he arrived there as stated by the hall porter. The porter remembers because Nineveh called down to his basement office and told him to drive the car round to the garage. Nineveh had been drinking heavily, according to the porter, and also according to the doctor. The porter drove the car round, and went back to his office, where he remained until about ten o'clock. He had a lot of paper work to do, so he stayed down there. If tenants want him they can ring his bell. No one did. And he saw no one come or go, therefore."

"Are you by any chance thinking of arresting my cousin?" asked Ambrose.

"We'll have to ask her for a statement," said Mellor.

"And I shall advise her not to make one," said Ambrose deliberately. "Good afternoon, Mellor."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Merriman," said Mellor formally. "Good afternoon, Miss Brown."

At the door Ambrose paused.

"Hasn't it occurred to you," he said, "that someone has a key to Nineveh's flat. Therefore there was no need to knock or ring. Theo Nineveh's key was not in her bag."

"I haven't forgotten," said Mellor.

"Good afternoon," said Ambrose again.

He said nothing at all when we got out into the sunlight, just opened the car door for me, went and got into the driving seat himself and drove straight down to Fleet Street.

Chapter Nineteen

THERE is a tiny, very select club behind Fleet Street. It is in a little house in a tree-shaded courtyard, and it's full of books of reference, and all the papers published in the world apparently. It's shabby and quiet, and usually rather empty in the afternoon, when the bar is closed. But you can get coffee and sandwiches if you want them, and sit in a comfortable chair.

We went there, and Ambrose put me in a corner, ordered me coffee and a ham sandwich, and then went to telephone in a booth in the hall. He was away for about ten minutes, and when he came back he looked slightly less white and tense.

"Gull will be round in a few minutes," he said. "And so will Brink. I managed to contact both of them."

Then he sat down and stared straight in front of him with a sightless look.

"Incidentally," he said, after a while, "I got Gilda at her office and told her to come straight round here, and I only hope Mellor's minions don't get there before she starts. If they do, I told her to refuse to go to the police station with them unless they were prepared to charge her with something and arrest her. She can do that by law. And we'll have to take the risk that Mellor will take the risk of charging her. . . . I don't think he's quite ready to do that. . . ."

He looked at me as if he really saw me again and smiled.

"Poor moppet," he said, "it's not very pleasant for you all this. But I'll remove Gilda for a time, anyway. She seems determined to hang herself, but I'm damned if I'll let her drag you in as an accessory after or before—which she's quite capable of doing."

Suddenly Gull was in our midst. A very dangerous, sardonic looking Gull, who said abruptly, "What lunacy is this?"

"Gilda's," said Ambrose. "Sit down and don't lour over me. This is definitely serious. I'll tell you briefly while Delia goes

to telephone. Delia, be good and telephone Gilda's office, you know the number, and find out if she's left yet. If you find that the place is full of policemen, come back and tell me and I'll have to go and cope."

As I went I heard Gull say that Mellor must be out of his mind, and Ambrose saying something to the effect that Mellor was as sane a policeman as they came, and Gilda had a lot of explaining to do.

And when I got back to them with the news that Gilda had left the office, but that the police had arrived about five minutes after she'd gone, Gull was calm again, but definitely depressed.

"She ought to be here any minute," said Ambrose. "I just want to know her exact movements last night, and then you can take her straight off."

"I'll do that," said Gull grimly.

"Of course, they'll catch up with you in time," said Ambrose. "But that's what I want—time."

Gull looked at him steadily.

"Have you any doubts about Gilda?" he asked.

"My dear man," said Ambrose wearily, "I have doubts about everyone. You included. Naturally. You and Gilda can vouch for each other from ten o'clock onwards. You arrived at Schloss Brown at eleven. That gives Gilda one hour in which to fool around, and there's no doubt whatsoever that she went to Nineveh's flat. Personally, I think the fact that she left fingerprints all over the knocker and the bell proves quite conclusively that she didn't get into the flat, because if she'd been so idiotically careful to remove all fingerprints inside, presumably she would have done so on the door. . . ."

Unless," said Gull glumly, "she forgot—or was disturbed and bored."

"There's that," Ambrose admitted.

I was bursting to point out that whoever had done all that polishing of glasses and getting rid of fingerprints had been frightfully stupid if they wanted it to look like suicide, but somehow I didn't think it would be tactful. Besides, it was just the sort of silly thing someone like Gilda would do. . . .

"Bandar-log," said Gull suddenly. "It's typical of that impulsive, semi-clever, unco-ordinated mind. . . ."

"Or meant to look like it," said Ambrose. "It's typical of our murderer. He sees all round things, and sprinkles false impressions. He's clever, but my hope is he's just too clever. . . . So sharp, as Delia's dear old Nanny would say, that he'll cut himself."

At that moment Gilda came tearing in. She looked most oddly composed in one way, and underneath absolutely driven.

"Ambrose," she said. "I didn't."

"I don't suppose you did," said Ambrose. "But you've done your best in the rôle of First Murderer. Now, don't waste time. Tell me just what you did when you rushed away from Delia. . . ."

She was making far more sense than one would have expected.

"I went straight to Nineveh's flat," she said. "And I rang and knocked and rang and knocked. . . . I went on, I should think, for ten minutes. Then I realised he wasn't there. . . . So I took a taxi to the studio place, and kept it while I went in to see if he was there. He wasn't, so I went straight on to the Billhook, paid off the taxi there and thought I'd wait. I had two large gins, and then Emmie came in, and started on me. I suppose I was raw and slightly tight even, anyway I let fly back. I told Delia all that. Then Gull turned up . . . and then I left with him."

"All right," said Ambrose. "You got quite a lot into an hour or an hour and a quarter. Now clear off with Gull. He's got a car and you're going to Cornwall. . . . I'll let you know when to come back. . . ."

She didn't even argue about that. She just nodded. She didn't raise the question of going back to get a nightgown and a toothbrush. She just nodded and Gull stood up and said, "Well, here we go. You know where you can contact us, Ambrose?"

"Don't hang about," said Ambrose nervily. "I know."

"I'm sorry, Ambrose," said Gilda ambiguously, and then she and Gull went away.

Ambrose looked at his watch.

"If he can get her out of London in half an hour," he said, "then he'll get her clear away. My hope is at the moment that Mellor has beaten back to your house, and then to mine . . .

and that he'll have the railway stations watched, but he won't get on to 'Calling all cars' just yet. We've got to work very quickly, Delia, my poor poppet."

"Do you know who it is?" I asked.

He put one arm lightly round my shoulder for a moment and shrugged slightly.

"I think I do," he said. "But I'm not saying anything. I'll tell you who it's not. It's not Brink—it's not Julian—(obviously) and it's not Gilda."

But it couldn't be Gull! I wouldn't even allow myself to think of that. It couldn't be.

"You see," said Ambrose thoughtfully, "Mellor has a blind spot about this murder. He's got it into his head that it must have been committed between nine and ten o'clock. It doesn't seem to have occurred to him that it could have happened any time up to midnight."

He looked at his watch.

"If Brink doesn't turn up in the next ten minutes," he said, "we won't wait. I've got things to do."

But just then I saw Brink coming into the room. He looked morose and anything but co-operative. In fact, he looked purely 'dead pan,' and gave me a sour, but polite smile.

"Our assassin is mixing it a bit, isn't he?" he said, with a shocking, dead sort of flippancy.

"Not so clever of him," said Ambrose mildly. "He makes it more and more clear that Julian had nothing to do with it. Don't you agree?"

"Oh, I agree," said Brink, dropping the flippancy and looking suddenly exhausted.

"Lots more questions from the police," said Ambrose; "his more alibis to be checked on. . . ."

Brink gave a sudden grin.

"Don't worry about mine," he said. "It's impeccable. I dined for once with my respectable aunt and a cousin of mine. I didn't leave her house until midnight—family business, heavy business to discuss—and then my excellent cousin drove me in his handsome automobile to Abel Alley, where I had a beer with the Captain and went to bed. Not guilty, m'lud."

Ambrose shrugged slightly.

"I'm asking you," he said deliberately, "whether you have any idea at all who did these two murders?"

"It—might have been anyone," said Brink equally deliberately.

"All right, then," said Ambrose, "I give you full warning, Brink, I'm not going to pull any punches. I don't care who gets hurt over this, but I'm going to find out who was with you and Theo in that car . . . and that'll be the murderer."

Brink's eyes flickered and then he grinned disagreeably.

"Go ahead," he said. "What about Manon?"

"She stole the bag," said Ambrose flatly. "She's confessed to that."

"Where from?" asked Brink violently.

"That you'll discover when she comes up before the magistrate," said Ambrose coldly.

"All right," said Brink.

"At least you can be relieved to hear that what you were afraid of didn't happen," said Ambrose. "In that particular instance," he added.

"What do you mean—in that particular instance?" said Brink.

"Remember the gas-man?" asked Ambrose. "Well, that was someone trying to plant evidence on an innocent person, and it was probably the same person you were afraid had planted the handbag on Manon. Think it out . . . and then decide whether you'll co-operate or not. Come on, Delia, we've got places to go to."

We went away, leaving Brink standing and looking after us. He looked battered and obstinate and very ill, and it made me feel rather mean in some way. As if Ambrose had hit him unfairly or something—and that was nonsense, because now it seemed almost certain that someone had been in the car with him, and he knew who it was, and was still protecting him.

"We're going straight out of town," said Ambrose. "I don't want to see Mellor until I've collected some loose ends and tied them up neatly. I'm sorry about Brink—but if he chooses to shield a particularly cold-blooded murderer, then it's too bad."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Down to Nineveh's cottage," said Ambrose. "I suppose Nineveh has some relations. We'll pick up Edward and Polly and get off at once."

"Edward and Polly!" I exclaimed in amazement.

"Both of them," said Ambrose. "It will keep them out of mischief. . . ."

I supposed he knew what he was doing, but it seemed really rather daffy to me.

As we got into the car Ambrose produced one of his maddening, cryptic grins.

"Besides," he said, "I think by now Edward must have got quite a long way with the softening-up process!"

I didn't ask what he meant, because I had an obscure idea of my own about that. And I didn't ask why we were going down to Nineveh's cottage, though I hadn't any idea about that. What did occur to me as we drove to find Edward, was that everything had become really a little mad. And how curious it was that Julian, who had been so important, seemed to have become unimportant. I don't think now that even Mellor believed he was guilty, and quite suddenly all his personality and troubling charm were unreal. Even to Gilda they were unreal now. That, I thought, was going to be Julian's tragedy when he was free. He would expect everything to be as it was; he would be able to walk straight back to a slavish Gilda and start again. And nothing of the kind would happen. His prop and support was gone. . . . I didn't believe, of course, that Gilda had killed Paul Nineveh. But—well—it would be appalling if she was arrested and charged with it. I wondered just what Ambrose really thought about Gilda. . . . Everything was rather hideous. I'd felt badly enough during the Grogan affair, but there nobody had been at all close to me . . . or to Ambrose.

"You see," said Ambrose suddenly as if he had been talking to me for some time, "the local police will undoubtedly have gone through the cottage and interviewed whoever is down there, but the same thing applies as in Abel Alley . . . whoever is there is mixed up in so much nonsense, they'll shut up like a clam, for fear of being dragged into something."

He pulled up outside the picturesque but dilapidated

terrace of houses facing the canal where Edward lived, suddenly patted my hand and grinned reassuringly.

"Not to worry," he said. "It's a grubby sort of mess, but we'll sort it out."

He got out of the car and departed in search of Edward, and left me to brood rather worriedly over that. A very queer idea had come into my head that when we did sort it out the answer was going to be something of a shock.

I sat there looking vaguely at the steely oily water in the canal, and faintly aware of wind rustling the leaves of a tree in Edward's front garden, when suddenly a very odd-looking young man wearing a yellow sweater and blue cotton pants leaned over the side of the car and said to me, "I'll tell you something. The gas-man wasn't a gas-man." He wore his hair in a crew cut and had sparkling blue eyes and a very wide mouth which curled suddenly into a very iniquitous smile. Then before I could say anything he swooped away and went running down towards a gap in the railings by the canal.

So when Ambrose came back without either Edward or Polly, I was still too surprised to be surprised any more, if you see what I mean.

"They've bolted," said Ambrose irritably. "Silly young fools."

He got back into the car and slammed in the gear.

"Bolted?" I echoed dumbly.

"Bolted," said Ambrose. "Edward had left me a note saying Polly had got the wind up badly, so he'd taken her down to the country."

"Wind up?" I echoed, even more crassly. "But did he expect you?"

"Phoned him from Fleet Street," said Ambrose. "Stupid of me. I ought to have taken them by surprise. Well, it can't be helped. At least if I haven't got them, Mellor hasn't either."

He was driving very fast through the traffic, and so for a little while my whole mind was concentrated on not being petrified. Going through Hammersmith was sheer hell . . . there's no other word for it, but once we got on to the Great West Road I was able to relax and my brain began to function again—though rather spasmodically.

"Why had she got the wind up?" I asked.

One of the things about Ambrose is that he's like the man in the story, who boasted to the devil about having a good memory. The devil appeared in a cloud of smoke, asked, "How do you like your eggs done?" and disappeared; ten years later he reappeared, and the man merely looked at him and said, 'Fried.' Ambrose does much the same when I ask something out of the blue.

"She's been holding out on us," he said. "Little idiot. She knew more than she told and I rather think that someone had given her the gypsy's warning."

And that brought back the young man with the crew cut, so I told Ambrose about him.

"Still, we knew he wasn't a gas-man," I added.

"That would be Derek Dea," said Ambrose thoughtfully. "He's not a bad youth . . . does stunts for movies. He was by way of being a boy friend of Polly's for a time. . . . All right, poppet, we'll look him up when we have time."

"I don't see that it helps," I argued. "We know all that. . . ."

"Lea; no stone unturned," said Ambrose inctuously, and then laughed. "I told you before, this is one murderer I shall find much pleasure in unmasking—as they say."

Once again that queer idea stirred in my mind, but it was so crazy that I simply hadn't the nerve to tell Ambrose about it.

Nineveh's cottage was small and pretty with a lawn that ran down to the river. In the pale golden afternoon light it looked dreamy and peaceful, and somehow one couldn't connect it up at all with his personality or with all the squalid things that had been happening. The door was opened to us by a tall, square-shouldered girl wearing slacks and a pullover. Her eyes were red-rimmed as if she had been crying, but her thin, squarish face was hostile and composed.

"I've nothing to tell you," she said, and began to shut the door.

Ambrose put his foot in it just in time.

"We're neither Press nor police," he said. "Do you or do you not want whoever killed Paul caught?"

"I certainly do," she said in a husky, grim voice, and she relaxed slightly. "You're Ambrose Merriman, aren't you?"

"Yes," he told her, "and this is Delia Brown—my fiancée."

She stared at us intently for a second, and then moved back from the door.

"Come in," she said. "My name is Hester Gaines. I'm Paul's stepsister."

I realised suddenly that here was something Ambrose hadn't known, and in a way it put him out of his reckoning.

It seemed Hester Gaines realised it too, for she smiled without any amusement.

"I know," she said. "Very few people knew about me—among Paul's circle, that is."

She showed us into a small sitting-room that was furnished with comfortable chintz-covered chairs and a few good pieces of old furniture. An elderly Irish terrier gave a half growl, then subsided and wagged a languid tail. The soft sunshine fell through the window in a shaft of light.

"Sit down," she said. "I'll make tea. I don't suppose this session will be short."

She went out of the room and left us with the Irish terrier, who regarded us with a carefully cautious air which said quite clearly, "I suppose it's all right, but don't try anything."

Ambrose was frowning in the way he does when he is concentrating. He was looking awfully tired.

"Of course," he remarked slowly, "Nineveh's father married a Mrs. Gaines *en seconde nocces*. . . . Paul's own mother died when he was quite young. He quarrelled with his father. . . . I remember Emmie Palfer telling me all about it that night at the Billhook. She seemed to have it on her mind rather. . . . I didn't listen much because I wasn't interested. But she never mentioned a stepsister. Perhaps she didn't know about one."

"She did," said Hester Gaines, coming into the room at that moment. "Emmie Palfer knew us both years ago, before she married Rannie, and before Paul quarrelled with his father. She was"—a twisted little smile curled her mouth—"a relic of Paul's respectable days."

She was carrying a tea-tray and put it down on a low coffee table. There were small, buttery scones and a plum cake, and once again I got that sense of unreality—of nothing adding up.

She sat down composedly and began to pour out tea.

"I might as well tell you the background," she said quietly. "Backgrounds are important, I think. . . ."

"Very important," said Ambrose gently
She nodded.

"Paul could be very secretive," she said. "So could Theo. They were a peculiar couple, you know. Very conscious in a curious way of being *déclassés*. Theo always pretended she didn't care . . . but Paul could never quite decide what attitude to adopt. . . ."

Ambrose settled himself quite unconsciously into his listening attitude. His real listening attitude is quite different from the one he can put on when he's only pretending to be interested. And I knew that he wouldn't mind how much preamble this girl used, because she would not get off the real essentials.

"I was very fond of Paul," she went on, "and very sorry for him. He had been almost pathologically devoted to his mother, and he believed that his father had treated her badly. I don't think that was true. I've gathered from other people—relations—that she was a pretty, neurotic creature who played on Paul's feelings and was quite conscienceless really. He deeply resented my mother . . . but—oddly enough—not me. Then, of course, there was that business of forging a cheque of his father's. The old man paid up, but he never spoke to Paul again. Then he married Theo. She was notorious before he married her. But he always refused to believe what was said—and when he was married and found out the truth then he was too proud to admit it."

She hesitated a moment and her intelligent, thin face became both sad and pitiful.

"A great deal of Theo's activities were attributed to Paul," she said, "and he accepted the onus. I don't know why, really. I suppose he was deeply in love with her. . . . You know—like Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*. When his father died he left Paul a good deal of money. He was really a very nice man and it was a tragedy that Paul had got that twist about him. At any rate, he—the old man—did not believe, he said, in carrying on a grievance beyond the grave, and that it never did any man any good to be deprived of money. He left me an income too. . . . But when Paul did come into the money it was too late for him to change his way of living. . . . He couldn't get back. It would have meant parting from Theo for one thing. . . ."

She paused again.

"I'm not pretending," she said, "that Paul hadn't gone rather rotten himself in some ways. It was inevitable that he should. No man could have continued to live as he did with a wife who behaved as Theo did without losing his self-respect—every atom of it. And no one can lose that without going to pieces in some way. This place was his refuge . . . Theo never came here. It really belongs to me, but Theo put it round that it was his . . . and I believe the general impression was that he came down here and indulged in"—a fleeting, wry humour touched her eyes—"nameless orgies.' I think she did that in a distorted attempt to justify herself."

"I don't think so," said Ambrose. "So far as I can see Theo Nineveh was one of the few people in the world who are utterly amoral . . . completely uninhibited and find no reason to justify anything, since nothing seems wrong to them."

"That's possible," said Hester, and looked at him doubtfully. "But Paul hadn't got that . . . he was full of guilt complexes. He covered up by being cynical and unkind and . . . pretending to be worse than he was."

"Tell me," said Ambrose gently, "do you know anything about a man called Brink?"

She nodded.

"Can you tell me," he urged, "whether Paul and Theo were in that car with him when it crashed?"

"Theo was," she said. "Paul wasn't."

It was evident that Ambrose had no doubt at all about her speaking the truth.

"There was someone else?" he asked.

"There was someone else," said Hester slowly. "But I won't tell you who it was, unless I am convinced that it—it has any bearing on Paul's death."

There was a small silence.

"You see," she added at length, "Paul kept that secret for Theo's sake . . . and I won't make his effort useless except for a very good reason. Perhaps that's sentimental. . . ."

"It is—rather," said Ambrose pleasantly. "But I understand how you feel about it. . . . But I am fairly sure, you know, that the whole of this wretched business, her death and his, hinges on who was in that car that night."

"Paul didn't think so—about Theo's death," she said sharply.

"From what you've told me," said Ambrose, "Paul's judgment might have been very much impaired. For some reason he seems to have become insanely jealous of young Cleghorn . . . the last person, I can assure you, of whom he needed to be jealous."

She merely looked desperately unhappy, but not convinced.

"I think," said Ambrose relentlessly, "that Theo's death was a direct result of that car smash. I am sure of it."

"Oh, no!" she cried. "Oh, no! It mustn't be—because—because if it was, then Paul needn't have been killed."

"What do you mean?" asked Ambrose sharply.

She looked at him with eyes that were much too bright and feverish.

"Don't you see," she insisted. "If that was so—if Paul had had any reason to believe that, he would have told the police everything about the smash. . . . He believed absolutely that it was Brian Cleghorn. . . ."

"Then why was Paul killed?" asked Ambrose.

She shivered suddenly.

"I don't know," she said. "Wait. Let me tell you exactly what happened last night."

"I wish you would," said Ambrose.

"It was very simple," said Hester slowly. "Paul was down here. He was in a wretched state. Drinking too much and talking on and on about Theo. You know the way people do . . . going over and over and round and round and wondering whether if they had done this—or that—they could have made everything come right. Then the telephone rang. I answered it and someone said they wanted to speak to Paul. . . . I was surprised because, as I told you, he's always kept this place absolutely—well—inviolate is the word. No one ever telephoned him here . . . no one was supposed to know the number, and the telephone is in my name. . . . It was that which made me hand over the telephone without really thinking. . . . I suppose my reaction was that it was important or Paul wouldn't have given them the number. . . ."

"Was it a man or woman?" asked Ambrose.

She frowned doubtfully.

"I'm not sure," she said at last. "The voice was obviously disguised. It was deep . . . but it *might* have been a woman. The thing is that afterwards I had an uncanny conviction that it was someone I knew. But it's not something I can be sure about, because the idea only came to me after I heard about Paul this morning, and so, you see, it could very easily be imagination—wishful thinking. . . ."

"Yes," said Ambrose. "Tell me, did you gather anything at all of the conversation? From Paul's answers?"

"Very little," she said. "But I *think* whoever it was used some kind of threat."

"I wonder," said Ambrose thoughtfully, "whether your local exchange ever listens in. . . ."

"Frequently," said Hester, and her lips twisted. "It's not the Henley exchange, you know. It's the village. . . ."

"Did you tell the police any of this?" he asked. "I suppose the local police have been here?"

She nodded.

"Yes. They came. They put seals on everything they could think of . . . Paul's own chest of drawers where he keeps papers . . . and the desk. I told them there had been a telephone call—nothing else."

"Thank you," said Ambrose. "Listen . . . it was not Julian Cleghorn who killed Theo. . . . You must realise that now."

"I think I do," she said huskily.

"Whoever killed Theo, killed Paul," said Ambrose. "And I am prepared to say that whoever it was, was in that car with Brink."

"You mean," she said, in a voice in which disgust and incredulity fought, "they repaid Paul for shielding them by killing him?"

"That's what I mean," said Ambrose in an expressionless voice.

"I don't believe you," she said in a shocked whisper. "No—I don't believe you. It's not possible."

"Anything is possible," said Ambrose in his most chilling tones, "from a person who would allow another man to go to prison for him."

But she wasn't listening. She was staring in front of her as if she saw something quite dreadful.

"Will you tell me who was in the car?" said Ambrose urgently.

"I must think," she said, "I must think. I promised Paul I would never tell. I must think."

The sound of a car pulling up quickly outside made Ambrose raise one eyebrow and look resigned.

"Enter Mellor in conjunction with the local man," he said. "All with pencils at the ready. . . . Miss Gaines, here are the police. If you won't tell me, will you promise not to tell them? I'm going back to London . . . and if I hear anything I will let you know."

The sound of footsteps marching up the path galvanised me into action, and before I had time to think whether Ambrose would approve or not, I said, "Miss Gaines, don't stay here alone. Please don't. Come up to London with us. . . . You could stay with me. But don't stay here alone."

"She's right," said Ambrose in a tone of unflattering surprise. "She's quite right. You know too much, Miss Gaines."

"I must think," she repeated dully. "I can't decide anything. But I won't tell the police. I can promise that."

The bell from the front door rang steadily as someone kept a finger on it.

"I'll answer it," said Ambrose placidly. "Mellor will be delighted to see me."

It was quite plain that Mellor was dark with disapproval. His almost courtly greeting to me was so swathed in velvet that one could hardly hear it.

"Good-bye, Miss Gaines," said Ambrose politely. "And thank you very much for the tea. I'll ring you later."

As we went down the garden path, where evening was already laying a filmy carpet of shadow, I suggested that now Mellor would simply refuse to let us know anything at all . . . and he could have checked on the telephone call.

"Not to worry," said Ambrose. "Little children not starve. Big ship come Malta. We are now going to the local inn. It's opening time."

Chapter Twenty

WHEN we got to the pub, Ambrose put on his most amiable idiot look and talked about everything in the world except Paul Nineveh. He told the landlord that he wanted to buy a cottage in the neighbourhood and asked whether there was any chance. The landlord didn't seem to think so. Cottages or houses, he alleged, were all snapped up at ridiculous prices before anyone knew what had happened.

It was a pleasant pub, and hadn't been spoilt by modern lighting and pseudo-antique furnishings, and I sat there quite contentedly while Ambrose babbled on. I was thinking that Hester Gaines had always been in love with Paul Nineveh, and how much more sensible and dignified she had been about it all compared with poor Gilda. I wondered whether she liked Emmie Palfer. She hadn't shown any kind of bias at all, but somehow I couldn't imagine those two getting on together. But I supposed that the reason Emmie was so certain about Julian was because she had known Paul and perhaps had liked him. You never knew with people like Emmie Palfer, they seemed frightfully conventional and sensible, and they fell for the most unexpected people. Not that I thought Emmie Palfer had *fallen* for Paul, but if she'd known him when they were both young, then she might have cooked up some sentimental emotion about him never having had a chance. One thing I did know. She'd always loathed Theo.

I came back from that reverie to become aware that Ambrose was now in the midst of a small group of locals, who were all now discussing Paul Nineveh's death. They'd all heard about it even though it had happened in London, and couldn't possibly be in the papers. Or could it?

The general feeling appeared to be that he was an odd gentleman and it wasn't really very surprising that something

had happened to him. Also—the local exchange did listen in . . . and did talk!

The telephone call that had taken Paul up to London had been discussed all over the village. But the operator hadn't been sure whether it was a man or a woman. Queer, hoarse kind of voice. Very peremptory too. The conversation had been very brief. "You'd better come up to town," the caller had said. "Brink is starting to talk. I'll come along to your place with him if possible. Anyway, I'll come myself. It's got to be stopped. . . ."

Ambrose continued to buy beer for some time, and then told me there didn't seem much chance of a cottage and we'd better get going.

We departed amid a chorus of good wishes and hopes that we should get what we wanted.

"I hope we have," I said to Ambrose when we were back in the car.

"We've got a little," he said. "Poppet, we're going to take Hester Gaines back to London if we have to do it by force. I don't want to give your father apoplexy, so I think we'll park her in my place. Spinks can look after her."

Well, I was glad that Ambrose didn't feel he ought to be there himself, and Spinks, who was once in the Navy, is enough protection for anyone.

It was nearly dark by then, and as we got back to the cottage and as there were no cars outside, I guessed that Mellor had taken himself off. I was half afraid that Hester Gaines might also have gone. She was the type of girl who would do precisely what she thought best . . . and who might easily decide to act on her own, though not in the same reckless way that Gilda did.

However, she was still there and let us into the cottage with an almost cordial manner.

"Look here," she said abruptly and frankly, "I'll accept your offer to take me up to London. I've an idea that you're right and it might not be at all safe down here on my own. But I'm not going to park myself on you, Miss Brown. I'll go to a hotel. I shall be quite safe there . . . and nobody need have any idea where I am."

"Good," said Ambrose. "Are you packed?"

He gave her his most friendly and affectionate smile, which meant that he really did like her very much and was prepared to trust her always. And suddenly I didn't mind in the least even if he did decide to stay in his own flat and look after her. She was nice. She was a person of integrity. . . .

"I'm all ready," she said. "I packed the moment Inspector Mellor had gone. I told him, incidentally, what I proposed to do and he gave me a dark and subtle smile and said that he thought I was very wise, and no doubt in his own good time Mr. Merriam would come and tell the proper authorities what he imagined he had discovered."

She gave a prim little smile as she said it and Ambrose laughed out loud.

"He did, did he?" he said. "Well, it will be in my own good time. Come along, then."

We all three sat in front, because it's a nice roomy two-seater, and Ambrose put Hester Gaines next to him. By the time we were half-way back to town, he had talked her quite casually into agreeing to stay in his flat in the care of the massive Spinks.

It was plain that he had decided Hester was someone with whom one could be absolutely frank, and also that she could be relied on not to get falsely emotional. He talked about Paul quite candidly, though he knew as well as I did that she had loved the man.

"I wish," he said, "that I had known about you before."

"It wouldn't have made any difference," she told him composedly. "Even if you had known about Paul and me, and had tried to get him to tell you anything, he wouldn't have listened."

"And even if I told him how important I thought it, you wouldn't have told me who was in the car?"

"You wouldn't have known how important it was," she answered. "It's only now that Paul has been killed that even I know how important it was."

"And you still won't tell me?" he said seriously.

"You must trust me," she said equally seriously. "I must find out something first. Oh, I promise you I won't do anything rash, and I won't tell anyone where I am."

And then she added, putting one thin, strong hand on his coat sleeve. "I shall know by tomorrow, and I will tell you

then, But I would really prefer that Brink told you . . . that's weak of me, isn't it? It's a sentimental effort to shift the responsibility—to keep my promise to Paul, even though it may be a foolish promise."

"It is, rather," said Ambrose. "But I'll give you till tomorrow, and I too—would prefer Brink to tell me. You see, I think—I believe that his reason for keeping silent is much more foolish than yours. His is also wrong . . . it's a distorted, self-deceived loyalty."

"It's possible," she said in a low voice, "that you may be very right about that."

When at last we got to town, we went straight to Ambrose's place, and Spinks, looking exactly like the sailor on the Player's packets, only attired in a white jacket and striped trousers, gave us grilled ham and eggs and strong coffee. He also appeared to approve of Hester. You can always tell when Spinks disapproves of anyone. He remains superbly butlerish, but something emanates. He's too polite. However, on this occasion, he was cordial and said the bed was aired, and it wouldn't take him a minute to get everything ship-shape, and he looked a bit 'glinty' about the eye, so I knew he was rather relishing everything, and he wouldn't be at all displeased if he had the chance of protecting Hester from thugs or anything else.

Hester looked horribly tired and sad, but there was an odd line to her mouth, a kind of exhausted, patient grimness; and when Ambrose said suddenly that he thought bed was the best place for her, and he was sure Spinks had put in hot water bottles, and intended to dose her with hot milk last thing, she gave a troubled, but charming smile, and answered that she agreed with him, and that Spinks was the kind of guardian one might dream about but never hope to find.

"Yes," said Ambrose thoughtfully, "I'm glad we've got Spinks."

So we said good night to her and went off to where the car was.

"I'll drop you safely at home," said Ambrose. "You look as if bed was the place for you too—and then I'm going to the Billhook."

"Then I'll come with you," I told him firmly.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," said Ambrose. "If anyone comes with me, it will be poor Inspector Mellor. It depends on how friendly he is at the moment. You won't miss anything, poppet, I'm only going to ask the cloakroom attendant some pertinent questions, and spread the news round that Hester Gaines is in my place."

"But really, . . ." I began indignantly.

"Use your head," said Ambrose indulgently. "'Come into my parlour,' said the spider. That's me—Spider Merriman."

"Oh . . ." I said.

But when we got back home, we found the most astonishing party going on. There was Inspector Mellor positively hobnobbing with The Parent. They had a decanter of whisky out, and The Parent's most cherished cigars, and the air was thick with smoke and bonhomie.

"Ah! there you are!" said The Parent genially, "Mellor here has just been telling me that young Julian is in the clear. Between ourselves, of course. They're not letting him loose just yet. But the boy's all right."

"Excellent," said Ambrose; "and I suppose the Inspector has got the real murderer?"

"Not quite yet, Mr. Merriman," said Mellor in his heaviest and most deceptive tones. "But, no doubt when you tell us all your own discoveries, we shall have no further difficulty. Brink is in hospital, by the way."

He gazed at Ambrose benevolently.

"What happened to Brink?" asked Ambrose.

"A—car knocked him down," said Mellor blandly. "Nearly killed him. Car didn't stop, drove straight on."

"Where did this happen?" said Ambrose.

"It happened in Flinshon Gardens, just by Abel Alley," said Mellor. "Nice quiet road, as you know."

"Anyone see it happen?" asked Ambrose.

"Couple of kids," said Mellor. "All the housewives were getting tea, and there was one old lady walking down from the other end. She had hysterics. The kids were the most sensible. They bolted in to their mum, and she got on to a telephone and dialled 999. Once it had happened, of course, the usual crowd sprang up from nowhere."

"I see," said Ambrose thoughtfully. "Is he going to live?"

"It's a possibility, but that's all," said Mellor.

He looked down his nose and waited.

"Kids able to describe the car?" Ambrose asked.

"They got the number before it happened," said Mellor gloomily. "Collecting car numbers, they were, but . . . it was a stolen car. The owner is a highly respectable colonel who was playing bridge at the time. He'd left his car parked in Flinshon Gardens. Whoever stole it must have done so at the psychological moment that Brink chose to come out of Abel Alley and start to cross the road in Flinshon." Talk about coincidence.

Ambrose said nothing, but asked The Parent if he might pour himself out a whisky. The Parent cocked a very thoughtful eye at him and said to make it a large one, he looked as if he needed it.

"The car was abandoned in Hampstead," Mellor remarked helpfully.

"All right," said Ambrose grimly. "I've taken all your points, Mellor. Plain attempt at murder. Well—there's one thing you might do before I go any farther. You might find Edward Gaunt and a young person called Polly, and park them in the nearest police station until we can get round to talking to them."

"If you haven't already put them wise to refusing to accompany the police unless they're being charged," said Mellor with some bitterness.

"Then charge them," said Ambrose impatiently. "Charge them with stealing my cigarette case. I happen to know that Gaunt has it on him—I lent it him some days ago."

"Very well," said Mellor. "May I use the telephone?"

"Certainly," said The Parent in a faintly stunned tone.

"He never said a word to me about all this," he added when Mellor had gone to telephone.

"He wanted to get some kind of reaction out of me," said Ambrose. "Well, he has, if it's any satisfaction to him. He won't get any sleep tonight."

Mellor came back into the room.

"Might I ask," he said with weighty sarcasm, "whether you have any idea where the police should look for these two? It might save a little time."

"I should think they've gone to Aylesbury," said Ambrose. "Gaunt has an unconventional uncle down there who writes books. That's the most likely. Uncle is called Gaunt too, I believe."

"Thank you very much," said Mellor in the most ungrateful tones.

He went back to the telephone.

"I find it very difficult to understand how you can contemplate jailing young Gaunt on a false charge," said The Parent snuffily.

"Because he and Polly happen to have some very important evidence," said Ambrose, "and I don't want either of them shot out of this world suddenly—as Nieveh has been and as Brink nearly was."

Mellor returned again.

Ambrose looked at him thoughtfully.

"We've got a lot to do," he said. "There's an amateur dramatic society called 'The Gaudy Thespians.' I want the secretary of that affair interviewed straight away—and then we're going to the Billhook."

"We?" said Mellor innocently.

"If you want to hear my very interesting information," said Ambrose.

He kissed me amiably on the forehead, said good night to The Parent, and departed.

"Sometimes," said The Parent darkly, "I wonder if I am wise in allowing you to marry that young man."

Well, sometimes I wondered myself, but I wasn't going to tell him that. Besides, I was feeling rather sick with alarm, and the queer little idea that had started nagging at me earlier in the day came back, and this time it was more than an idea—it was almost a conviction. I thought about poor Brink, and how really it was all his fault. If he hadn't been in that car and gone to prison, none of this would have happened. It just seemed as if from that everything was inevitable—like Greek drama.

But there was nothing I could do about it until Ambrose came back, and, besides, I rather thought that he had already come to the same conclusion.

I wished I could go along and talk to Hester Gaines, but it

wouldn't do. The only thing was to go to bed. . . . So I said good night to The Parent and went upstairs absolutely certain I should never get to sleep, and all that happened was that I fell asleep immediately and never heard Ambrose come home. Well, I couldn't have. Because he didn't come home. He didn't even telephone.

Chapter Twenty-one

IF there was one thing I did know, it was that Ambrose would be quite outraged if I panicked, and, besides, I also knew that if anything serious had happened to him, someone would have let me know. It wasn't likely that both he and Inspector Mellor had both been wiped out. So after breakfast I contented myself with telephoning through to Spinks' to find out how Hester Gaines was. She was quite all right and came to the telephone to tell me so.

Nothing at all had happened, she said, and she hadn't yet been able to make the contact she wanted; but she would try during the morning, and how was Ambrose?

He wasn't home yet, I told her, and then I went further and told her about Brink.

I heard her give a sort of gasp and then there was silence for a split second. Then her voice sounded through again, very cold and steady.

"That settles it," she said. "I will tell Mr. Merriman who was with Brink as soon as he returns."

I wanted desperately to ask her to tell me, but before I had a chance . . .

"I would tell you," she said, "but it's better not. I think that action must be taken as soon as possible, but it is better no one else knows until I can tell Mr. Merriman and the police."

"Yes," I agreed, "it's better that way. I—now I come to think of it, I don't want to know—for certain."

"For certain?" she said doubtfully.

"I've got a horrible idea myself," I told her. "Do look after yourself, won't you?"

"I have Spinks," she said. "Delia—you haven't spoken of this—this idea of yours to anyone?"

"Certainly not," I said indignantly.

"You're not alone, are you?" she asked anxiously.

"Good gracious, no," I answered. "I've got Nanny here—and my father."

"Well, that's all right."

She sounded relieved, but it gave me a slight *frisson* to realise that she thought I might be in danger.

"Whatever you do," she added, "don't go out, Delia. I mean, don't take any notice of any telephone messages that are supposed to come from Ambrose. Promise?"

"Well, of course," I said.

"There's no 'of course' about it," said Hester in an abrupt, nervy voice. "You don't realise what you're up against. You're up against someone who's running amuck now."

She stopped suddenly and evidently looked round.

"It's all right," she said, "Mr. Merriman is here. Wait a minute. . . . He wants to speak to you."

Ambrose's voice came over the line.

"Hullo, moppet," he said. "Now listen—they've got Edward and Polly and they're bringing them back to London now. Now do this: get a radio taxi and drive straight round here. I'll explain it all when you arrive."

"All right," I said.

After all, it was Ambrose himself. I couldn't mistake his voice. But it shows you what a state I'd got into when I wondered for one moment whether Radio Cabs might somehow or other be in cahoots with a murderer.

However, I was saved any real anxiety, because just as I was going to get a cab, Mellor arrived in a police car, and he had Edward and Polly with him. Apparently he'd expected to find Ambrose with me, and he grumbled a lot about things being unethical and unofficial and about being drummed out of the force if ever all this came out; but then he said we'd all drive round to Ambrose's, and added obscurely that it couldn't do any harm, because the party concerned was under observation and hadn't started out yet.

So I got into the police car, which positively swooped away, and drove like the wind to Ambrose's place. Then we got out of the car and hurried into the flat. The police car didn't wait; it quietly slid away.

Spinks received the invasion with his most butler-like dignity, though he almost flinched when he saw Polly, who

was now wearing a singlet and black drain-pipes. Very firmly he detached me from the rest, showed them into a small room which Ambrose calls the ante-room and where he puts people who come to try and sell him stamps and pictures . . . and which is furnished austere with a deal desk and six kitchen chairs.

Spinks showed me into the sitting-room where Ambrose was sitting talking to Hester.

"I'm not alone," I told him. "Mellor and Pennell and Edward and Polly are all here too."

"Well, that's difficult," said Ambrose. "They'll have to stay here now. And it may be a long time. Hullo, Hopper. Have some coffee while I go and see Mellor, and also see where we're going to park these people."

Hester looked at me and smiled faintly. In the morning light she looked fine-drawn and pale, with blue shadows under her eyes, but absolutely composed and somehow determined.

"I've told him," she said. "Do you know who it was? I can tell you now."

"I think it was Rannie Palfer," I said.

She nodded.

"Yes . . . it was," she told me in a troubled voice. "It's too appalling for Emmie. . . ."

"Yes . . . I could see that. It was too appalling for Emmie. If only I'd liked Emmie better, then I could have felt even more how appalling it was for her. But the thing was, I didn't like Emmie, and I couldn't really feel sorry for her. In a queer and quite unjustified way I found myself thinking that really it was much more appalling for Rannie. After all, it was he who was going to be hanged."

And what was even more awful, and it made me feel that I was rapidly losing all really nice feelings, I couldn't help feeling that it was a pity that anyone had to be hanged on account of the Ninevehs. And then I remembered Bink and realised that Rannie Palfer was like a mad dog. He'd kill anyone now . . . just as a mad dog would bite anyone.

"I don't like Emmie," I said slowly, and not quite knowing why I said it—except that it was some kind of protest. But against what I couldn't think.

"I know," said Hester. "I don't like her myself. She's so smug . . . she's so always right and superior; but just the same it's appalling for her. More appalling, really, than if she was not so right and superior."

I didn't say anything, because I didn't really agree. Just because Emmie was so right and superior, I couldn't help feeling that it served her right. It would have been so much worse if she had been someone who was really good and kind. Emmie wasn't.

Then Ambrose came back and looked at us both:

"Hester," he said, "will you now go and tell Mellor all you've told me."

"I suppose so," said Hester wearily.

She got up and walked towards the door. Ambrose smiled at her encouragingly.

"You don't suppose Paul would want you to keep the secret any longer, do you?" he said. "While he genuinely believed it was Julian, it was different."

She looked at him in a tired way.

"It was Emmie who persuaded him of that," she said. "She'd warned him about Julian before, you know. At odd intervals . . . when she met him casually at the Billhook. You don't think, do you, that she expected Rannie to do this?"

"She might have," said Ambrose.

"She couldn't have," said Hester in an agonised way. "She knew Paul when he was a boy. If she'd had any suspicion—*any*—she would have stopped it somehow."

"I don't know," said Ambrose in a curious, ambiguous tone. "Look at it this way. Rannie is her husband. . . ."

Hester said nothing more, but walked in to see Mellor.

Ambrose put his hands in his pockets and walked over to the window.

"If Brink dies," he said, "there is only one other person left who knows who was with him in the car . . . and that's Hester. At least so far as—Rannie knows. It's a possibility, of course, that Nineveh had never confided in Hester—but it's too much of a risk to leave it to that chance, don't you think? For Rannie, I mean. . . ."

"You don't think . . . you don't mean he'll try and murder

Hester?" I insisted. "Besides, he must think she's already told you. . . ."

"Two murders—one attempted murder," said Ambrose grimly. "Doesn't it strike you that he's beyond reason now?"

He still stared out of the window and it was so quiet that I could hear the clock ticking and the soft rustle of leaves from a lime tree outside.

"There was a letter in Theo Nineveh's bag," he went on, as if he were recapitulating facts to himself. "Unsigned and handwriting obviously disguised . . . confirming the appointment in Gilda's flat. And promising to bring money. . . . It was in an envelope with another letter, which was how it was missed, I suppose. . . ."

He half turned.

"I suppose," he said, "there wasn't time to go through it in the flat, and he had to get to the Billhook. The clock was small and could be left in an overcoat pocket, but Theo's bag was a young portmanteau. So it had to be searched and then discarded. Time was the factor. So it was left in the Billhook, shoved behind that big palm in the entrance by the cloakroom. Manon, being a magpie, saw it and picked it up."

It was as if he was filling in time telling me this. I could feel him waiting for something; the whole atmosphere was filled with expectancy—frightening expectancy. My mouth felt dry and I just sat and listened.

"Did you ever hear of a silly farce called *Gas Man's Holiday*?" he asked suddenly.

I shook my head.

"The Gaudy Thespians put it on last autumn," he said. "Rannie Pafer played the Gas Man. He was very good, so the secretary said, and he saved them money by producing his own uniform."

"I see," I murmured.

It all seemed to add up, and yet somehow it didn't. I couldn't say why it didn't, it was absolutely logical . . . but still I felt there was something wrong somewhere. If Nineveh had been so jealous of Julian, why hadn't he been jealous of Rannie. Or Brink? If he knew Rannie had been driving, not Brink; why hadn't he said so and saved Brink? Or had Theo had so much influence that she had not allowed him to?

"Brink," said Ambrose thoughtfully, "has been in love with Emmie Palfer for years. It's curious how that rather tiresome and daunting woman seems to inspire the tender passion in some men. I can see why Brink fell for it. Over-developed Oedipus, as the trick cyclists would say. She gave him a warm, secure feeling, poor little man. But I can't see what Gull fell for. . . ."

But I had to protest about that. After all, Gull was in love with Gilda.

Ambrose nodded.

"He is," he said. "But for all that he had an odd thing about Emmie. That's why he encouraged Gilda to see such a lot of the Palfers. He thought they'd be good for her with their cool, wholesome outlook on life. How blind can a man be?"

Hester came back to us. She looked whiter than ever, but less taut and strained. Mellor came with her and he nodded confidentially to Ambrose.

"Miss Gaines has been very good," he said. "It has been very painful for her."

Ambrose came forward and took her by both hands.

"It's going to be more painful," he said. "Can you go through with it?"

"I'll go through with it," she told him.

"I ought to tell you," said Mellor, "that it is almost sure that we can prove it in any case, but this will be a very short cut, and save other people a great deal of strain. . . . Particularly Brink. He may recover, and it would be better that it is all over before he is well enough to realise everything."

"I understand," said Hester Gaines. "I can go through with it."

She caught her breath.

"But I hope it happens quickly," she said.

"It will happen quickly if it happens at all," Ambrose told her.

The telephone rang and my heart lurched.

Spinks came into the room and took the call.

"Yes, sir," he said in his most 'service' voice. "Yes, sir. I understand, sir. But what about Miss Gaines? I understood you wished me to. . . . Oh, I see, sir. Very good, sir. At once, sir."

He put down the receiver and looked at Ambrose grimly.

"I've just received orders from the police, sir, that you require my presence at the police station at once," he said.

"All right," said Ambrose, "get your hat and go . . . better walk down the road, take a bus, then you can double back. Let yourself in quietly. . . ."

"Very good, sir," said Spinks, then took an invisible cap from under his arm, and marched smartly out.

I said suddenly: "I feel sick."

"Go into the kitchen," said Ambrose unsympathetically. "We'll join you in a few minutes."

"Call box, I should say," Mellor remarked. "Down the road probably."

The telephone rang again as I was half-way to the kitchen and I stopped as if I'd been shocked into paralysis.

"Take it," said Ambrose to Hester. "You're supposed to be alone now."

She picked up the telephone and said "Hullo" in a clear, almost casual voice.

There came a gabble from the other end.

"Oh—well, yes—Emmie," said Hester. "Yes, if you really think it's a good thing."

Ambrose's face was utterly expressionless, and Mellor had the abrupt appearance of a music lover listening to Bach.

"Yes—I'm alone," said Hester. "Mr. Merriman is out. I don't expect him here really, you know. He very kindly lent me his place as I couldn't bear to stay down in the country after—after what has happened."

She put down the receiver, and looked first at Ambrose, then at Mellor.

"It was Emmie," she said worriedly, "I think she—she has some idea about Rannie. She sounded very distressed. What can I say to her?"

"See what she has to say," said Ambrose quietly. "We'll leave you to it, my dear."

"But," she said unhappily, "I feel such a hypocrite . . . knowing what I do."

"It's too late to do anything about it now, Miss Gaines," said Mellor heavily.

And just then the front door bell rang twice. Two impatient, quick stabs at the bell push.

Ambrose, Mellor and I went into the kitchen which opened off the sitting-room. I thought of Edward and Polly sitting in the other room with Pennell.

Then the door was closed.

"Is that machine in working order?" said Ambrose under his breath.

Mellor nodded.

"But she won't talk much," he said grimly.

Ambrose went down on his knees shamelessly and squinted through the keyhole.

I heard Emmie's voice, rich and clear as it always was, but what Hester said wasn't distinguishable.

"My dear," said Emmie, "I had to come. I had to see you and tell you how terribly sorry I am about Paul. . . ."

There was a pause, and Hester said something, then Emmie's voice again, kind and sensible telling her she must not be too sad about it, saying that perhaps it was the best way out for Paul. She'd always thought he had suicidal tendencies . . . and Theo's death. . . .

For the first time I heard Hester's voice quite clearly.

"It was not suicide, Emmie," she said. "It was the gas-man."

There was a long pause. Ambrose never moved, but he stiffened, and I could see his jaw set.

"Hester dear," said Emmie, "you are a little distraught. Do sit down, my dear. Do relax. It must have been the most awful shock . . . but, of course, it was suicide."

"What makes you think it was suicide?" asked Hester clearly. "There was no hint of suicide in the newspaper reports . . . and was it suicide with that poor little man Brink? Did he throw himself in front of that car?"

"Brink was probably drunk," said Emmie in a cold, contemptuous voice.

"I can't listen to you any longer," said Hester, and I realised she was talking so clearly on purpose. "I can tell you this, Emmie, someone dragged Paul's head back and poured cyanide down his throat. And I know who it was."

"Do you?" said Emmie. "Do you? But no one else ever will. No one. Do you think I was going to let that little devil Theo Nineveh make Rannie's life a hell for ever? Do you? Getting rid of those people was like killing vermin. They were vermin."

Ambrose straightened and stood up, one hand on the door handle. Mellor took one step towards him.

Then Hester screamed once, and the scream turned into a choked gurgle just as Ambrose flung the door open and rushed in followed by Mellor.

Emmie Palfer was behind Hester's chair and she had a scarf she was twisting round Hester's throat. Spinks came in by the door from the hall, and there was a horrible scrabbling struggle and Emmie made choked, hoarse shouts; then Pennell was there, and Pennell and Spinks had her held between them, and they dragged her out of the room.

Out in the hall Emmie was still shouting incredible things. And in the room Ambrose was holding Hester up. She had bruises round her throat—faint ones—but she was all right. And in the hall Emmie was shouting. "His own cyanide. His own cyanide that he killed moths with. I thought it very suitable—suitable—his own cyanide. I knew where it was . . ."

Then Mellor was out in the hall and the door was shut behind him. The shouting could still be heard, but it was confused now, and horrible, hardly human. I sat down with a thump on the settee because my knees gave way.

Hester said in a hoarse, broken voice:

"You should have told me. You should have told me. I thought it was Rannie."

"If I'd told you," said Ambrose unhappily, "you wouldn't have been able to face it. It was bad enough when you thought it was Rannie."

"I could believe it was him," she said slowly. "I could never have believed it was her. She'd known him when he was young, —she'd stayed in our house. She'd . . ."

Mellor came back into the room.

"They've taken her down to the station," he said grimly. "She'll be charged there. Cleghorn will be released almost immediately."

He looked at Hester and shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It was a shock. I'm very sorry."

Quite suddenly I realised that that velvet voice could be the opposite of sinister, it could be comforting.

Spinks came into the room. He looked imperturbable and competent.

"I will make some strong coffee, sir," he said: "With a little brandy it will do the lady good."

He marched through to the kitchen.

"I must get down to the station," said Mellor. "I'll see you later, Merriman. That girl Polly has agreed to make a full statement now. I'm taking her and young Gaunt with me."

At the door he paused.

"I don't blame the girl Polly for being frightened," he said. "She had good cause to be."

He shook his head gloomily and departed.

"It's all over," said Ambrose gently to Hester. "Please believe it's happened for the best."

She shook her head doubtfully.

"I don't understand at all," she said. "Paul—I suppose the reason he wasn't suspicious or jealous about Rannie Palfer was because Emmie was there too."

"I suppose so," said Ambrose.

He looked over at me.

"You'll be all right in a minute, moppet," he said kindly. "Spinks' coffee will help."

I said nothing. I was thinking how odd it was that all the time Ambrose was talking earlier, when he stood by the window, when he seemed to be building that case up against Rannie, I'd felt all the time there was a false quantity somewhere.

"I shall be all right too," said Hester faintly. "It's just that I don't understand—I can't understand. Poor Paul—poor Brink . . ."

It was rather sad that no one even thought, poor Theo.

Chapter Twenty-two

It had all to be explained to Gull. He brought Gilda up from Cornwall two days after it had all happened, and he was incredulous and stubborn.

Hester Gaines had gone away to stay with friends in the country and Edward had taken Polly down to his uncle, and it looked as if they were really going to make a match of it. No one had seen or heard of Rannie Palfer—though Mellor said cynically that Palfer seemed a curious sort of man who took it almost for granted that his wife should commit murder to save his reputation and pocket.

We hadn't seen Julian, but we expected him any time. Apparently there were quite a number of formalities to be gone through before he could be set free.

But there was Gull in the morning-room, standing in front of the mantelpiece and frowning at Ambrose.

Gilda sat in a small fireside chair looking exhausted but calm. She didn't seem to have any emotions left.

"From the moment Theo's bag came to light," said Ambrose steadily, "it was quite plain that it wasn't Julian. I've no sympathy for him. He deserved all he got, but that's beside the point. The note with the appointment proved Brink's story, though it didn't necessarily let Brink out at that juncture. Then when Manon confessed that she stole the bag from the Billhook it became obvious that whoever had done it had come to the Billhook. That gave a pretty wide field. There was Brink, Nineveh himself, the Palfers, you possibly, Gull, but you arrived too early, very possibly Gilda.

"Mellor's no fool, you know, Gull. Gilda's alibi was proved by a cleaner who'd looked in without Gilda noticing—and by the police checking on the taxi and the coffee-bar. Until Brink started creating about Manon, and then started his story about Julian and his—Brink's—interview with Theo,

there was no reason in the world to look into the Palfers alibi. And then it was glaringly obvious that it should be looked into. Neither of them put forward anything very convincing. On the other hand, their stories had the ring of innocence. Emmie had stayed on correcting proofs for some article until eight o'clock. She did do that. A colleague of hers corroborated it. After that she decided to snatch a quick meal the same as Gilda, but she said she went to Forte's in Piccadilly and nobody there could swear to noticing her—it's very crowded as you know. Then, according to her, 'she took a No. 9 bus to Knightsbridge. Couldn't prove it—on the other hand no one could disprove it.

"Then—it began to seem as if someone was operating cleverly, using the Bandar-log theory put forward by Gull. But it gave whoever it was false confidence. You see, in the beginning it looked very like Julian—and with Julian were the senseless, pointless activities of the Bandar-log. A brilliant cover-up for anyone working behind that screen.

"Now, the whole point, Gull, is that *Emmie* was driving. From various bitter and damaging admissions she's made, it appears that Rannie was in the back of the car with Theo. Brink would not have shielded Rannie, but he would shield Emmie. Nineveh would not have kept quiet and allowed Brink to shield anyone at all if he had thought that Rannie was not driving. His jealousy, though kept under, was almost pathological. But he did understand Brink's wish to shield Emmie. Nineveh could always understand a man's hopeless entanglement with a woman. The tragic thing about Nineveh's death is that it was quite unnecessary. He had no idea at all. He wasn't dangerous. But Emmie was becoming more and more frightened because of Brink. . . ."

"But Brink didn't know Emmie was going to meet Theo," said Gull suddenly.

"No—if he'd known that he would undoubtedly have stayed on. He went in to see Theo himself on pure impulse, having got the chance. He wanted to try and stop her blackmailing the Palfers, which he knew she was doing.

"Murderers so often over-elaborate," Ambrose went on. "It would have been better for Emmie if she hadn't tried to gild the lily by dressing up as a gas-man and planting the clock

and money in Julian's room. Polly saw her, Polly thought it was rather an odd gas-man, but as Polly lived among odd people she didn't think much about it till later. And then she slowly came to the incredible conclusion that it was not a gas man, but a gas woman. She confided this to Edward finally after she got an anonymous threatening letter. However—Edward told Mellor and me. But we kept that quiet.

"Then Emmie began to think things were getting really dangerous. She knew Brink would do all he could to prevent an innocent man being hanged. She thought Nineveh might finally come forward. So she made that telephone message. It was too simple in one way. Nineveh had no reason at all to be afraid of Emmie—he probably thought she was only afraid of the car smash being dragged up again. Emmie knew his hobby—his collection of moths—and she knew he kept the whole thing out in the open, including the cyanide. She didn't even have to get hold of poison. It was there waiting for her. But then she became quite stupid. She polished the glass—she took the cyanide bottle away with her. She made it impossible for it ever to be mistaken for suicide. But I think, by then, her brain had become slightly deranged. And killing had become her answer to everything, so Brink must also go."

Gulf said nothing for a long time. It was Gilda who spoke.

"I can't see why she had to take that handbag to the Billhook," she said. "Why not just throw it away in the street?"

"She hadn't time," said Ambrose. "She grabbed the clock and the money and she grabbed the bag. But her nerve wasn't up to sitting down and going through that bag with Theo lying there dead—and the possibility that Julian might return sooner than he was expected. And she had to go through that bag to find Rannie's letters to Theo. She hurried away, walked some distance, and picked up a taxi and went to the Billhook. She went into the ladies' room and in privacy there went through the bag—found Rannie's letters, but missed her own note making the appointment because Theo had shoved it in an envelope containing another quite innocuous letter. She couldn't just leave the bag in the cloak-room. That would have led immediately to a woman as the killer. So she took it out with her and shoved it behind the palm."

Gull walked over to the window jerkily and stood with his back to us.

"Was Rannie in on it?" he asked painfully.

Ambrose shrugged.

"My own opinion is that he knew—but we can't find anything to pull him in as an accessory," he said slowly. "I've an idea, and so has Mellor, that it was Rannie who bashed me in the courtyard. There's no doubt that he came to the studio that night, but he didn't come in according to the doorkeeper. He looked in, muttered that his friend wasn't there, and went away—but he could have lurked about waiting for me."

"It's too damnable," said Gull. "Ermie—pulled down because of that cold-blooded lecher of a husband."

Ambrose's face went cold and slightly disgusted.

"I don't share your sympathy," he said curtly. "She could have left her husband—or stopped him in some way. She allowed that poor fool Brink to be gaoled for her offence. She was prepared—in fact she went out of her way—to let Julian be hanged for her murder. She killed Nineveh, who had never done her any harm, and who was fond of her. And she tried to kill Brink. She was as cold-blooded as her husband. She was cold-bloodedly jealous—and it was her pride that was hurt throughout, not her heart. Possibly when she did all this she was not entirely normal, but she was not mad. And she won't get away with being mad. She'll hang."

"She was a wonderful person ruined and wasted," said Gull violently and rushed out of the room.

There was a long silence. Gilda sat perfectly still and gazed at Gluckstein as if he was frightfully important to her. She looked very pale, but otherwise expressionless.

"Sorry, Gilda," said Ambrose. "But he'll get over it and come to his senses."

She shook her head. She even smiled faintly.

"He won't, you know," she said. "I've realised in these last few days that he's like Brink—absolutely enslaved. I think she's terrifying—all she ever wants is power."

Ambrose nodded.

"A frigid woman and a possessive one," he said slowly. "And above reproach or so they thought, poor idiots."

"I think," said Gilda, "that she *told* Gull he had better marry me. Ambrose—she meant it to be *me* who was hanged or Nireveh."

"She did," said Ambrose.

Gilda stood up and gave a curious, tranquil smile.

"Thanks for everything," she said. "I'm going home now. Julian will come straight to my house, you know."

She even sounded faintly amused.

Ambrose looked at her for a moment and then gave a queer sort of grin himself.

"Good luck," he said.

"I'll need it," said Gilda.

She sounded as if she didn't care anyway, and suddenly she kissed Ambrose lightly and went away.

"Really!" I said.

"I know," said Ambrose. "*Really!* It's vibrations or something, so they say."

He put an arm round my shoulder and said thoughtfully "Dear Delia—my really dear Delia—I think we need a holiday. Maybe a honeymoon."

"I think so too," I told him.

"So long," I added darkly, "as we don't have to take Melior on our honeymoon."

"Delia," said Ambrose firmly, "Mellor is out of our lives from now on."

He *sounded* convincing.

THE END

